

THE GREAT LENT
A JOURNEY TO GOD



By His Grace Bishop Metaous
Abbot of the Prosperous Syrian Monastery



In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.

INTRODUCTION

We present this humble book to you, dear reader – it is all about the journey of the Holy and Great Lent. The book begins with the Pre-Lent Sunday (Sunday prior to the start of Lent), it then progresses to the consecutive weeks of Lent all the way until Easter Sunday. The book does this in a way that progressively uplifts the soul to heaven, through fasting, prayer, Holy Liturgies, and Lent’s fervent hymns – whether in the form of praises or throughout the Holy Liturgy.

Indeed, the Great Lent is the spring of spirituality, which actually takes places throughout the months of spring (March and April). During the Great Lent, the weather is beautiful and refreshing; similarly, through fasting, a person’s spiritual life and psychological wellbeing becomes refreshed and rectified.

The ritual of fasting is a very ancient one that blossomed during Adam’s creation. In addition, the prophets – including Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Joel, spoke much about fasting. Moses, Jonah and many other prophets fasted throughout their lives. Over and above all, our Lord Jesus also spoke a lot about fasting.

We will begin by discussing the history of fasting throughout the Holy Bible:

As we all know, fasting began with Adam’s creation – the only commandment that God gave to Adam, was to fast, **“And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die.’”** (Genesis 2:16-17) In fact, this was a very important commandment because without it, Adam would have lived in paradise without any benefit. This commandment served as a link between Adam and God. This way, Adam would always remember God; hence, recalling God’s commandment. This commandment was a simple one, and it could have also been wrapped in the form of obedience, humility, chastity. God wanted to teach Adam to be obedient, humble, and chaste. God wanted to teach him about chastity – to be able to control himself, **“And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.”** (1 Corinthians 9:25) God Gave Adam a commandment in order to give him the

opportunity to persevere so as to fulfill the commandment, **“And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”**(¹ Tim ²:6) Unfortunately, both Adam and Eve failed the test when the serpent lured them. As soon as the serpent spoke to Eve, Eve was attracted to the forbidden tree, and its fruit then seemed wonderful to look at and to eat. It is so strange, because Eve was always walking around in the Garden of Eden – passing by the forbidden tree, so why did she suddenly become enticed by it? This is how Satan plans his tactics – he wraps sin in such a clever way so as to entice us, like a successful merchant who wants to sell his products, he draws everyone’s attention. Hence, Satan lied to Eve and led her astray – she ate from the forbidden fruit and she gave it to Adam, who also ate. Consequently, both Adam and Eve fell, and great was their fall. Instead of obeying God, they rebelled; instead of being humble, they became proud and pompous; instead of being chaste, they became lustful. Therefore, Adam and Eve fell into multiple sins because they broke God’s commandment of fasting. Afterwards, they were condemned to death, **“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”** (Genesis ²:17) **“...therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken, so He drove out the man; and He placed Cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”** (Genesis ³:23-24) Adam and Eve were facing four types of death:

1. Spiritual Death: This occurred when they were separated from God. The saints teach us that the physical death occurs when the soul is separated from the body, but the spiritual death occurs when one’s soul is separated from God. Hence, not only were Adam and Eve separated from God, they began to fear God – even though God was initially their source of joy and every time that Adam would hear God’s voice approaching in the garden, he would hasten to meet Him. Overall, Adam was looking forward to leading a life of bliss with God. However, after Adam’s downfall, he heard God’s voice and this time he trembled and he tried to hide from God. Clearly, sin leads to fear because sin is extremely evil. Adam was then filled with fear and he thought that by hiding amongst the trees, God would not be able to see him. Sin always blurs the vision and it forces the person to be blind – not being able to see things in their true light.
2. The Chastising Death: Secondly, although Adam was enjoying a sublime life in the Garden of Eden, it was sin that caused him to experience a

chastising death - when God thrust him out of the Garden of Eden and said, **“Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’, cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”** (Genesis 3:17-19) At this point in time, Adam was facing multiple consequences for his actions – ultimately, for breaking the commandment of fasting. The fact that Adam broke this commandment led him to break other commandments as well, he became rebellious, lustful, and arrogant. In breaking God’s commandment, Adam took Satan’s side as opposed to God’s side.

- ϣ. The Physical Death: Thirdly, Adam experienced the physical death at the age of 930 – this is when his soul parted from his body – because the wage for sin is death, **“Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings for death.”** (James 1:15)
- ε. The Eternal Death: Fourthly, Adam died an eternal death – he was tossed into hades and the gates of paradise in heaven were locked. He remained in hades until our Lord Jesus Christ came and saved him from this eternal death. It was through the cross that Christ then opened the gates of Paradise and admitted Adam. It has always been said that man’s initial sin was the breaking of the commandment of fasting.

Anyone who wants to begin a wholesome relationship with God, needs to begin by fasting – because fasting harbours a great strength and is extremely rejuvenating for one’s whole spiritual life. Anyone who wants to begin a life of repentance, a sound relationship with God, needs to begin during one of the fasting periods. Another way is to partake in a personal fast for a certain period of time accompanied by a prayer schedule, confession, and Holy Communion. These are the channels for grace and salvation through which people can begin a strong relationship with God – to charge themselves spiritually until they complete their journey with God by their sides.

Also, throughout the Old Testament, we see how fasting plays a vital role in the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. God saved the Israelites from the bondage of the Egyptians, with His mighty arm and great strength. After they were saved, they were led into the wilderness, where there was no food.

The Lord personally took on the responsibility of feeding them and caring for them – He brought them vegan food from heaven, which was the Manna. They would wake up in the morning and find the dew, and as soon as the sun would rise over the dew, they noticed that it turned into something flour-like. They would take this flour-like substance and bake it, after which it became a light pastry-like food, completely vegan. **“So when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.” (Exodus 16:16)** The Lord granted the children of Israel this gracious gift from heaven, on a daily basis – despite the fact that there were over one million people in number, still the Lord provided for them with plenty. On Friday’s, He would provide them with enough manna to last two days, because they kept the Sabbath day holy and would refrain from gathering any manna from the desert sands on that particular day.

Sadly however, the children of Israel murmured against God and against Moses because of what they were eating – they said many difficult things as a result. At one point they spoke against God and Moses, saying, **“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food, no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” (Numbers 21:5)** They murmured against God’s gift to them, by saying, **“Our Souls loathe this worthless bread...”** After complaining about the food, they began to complain about their dwelling in the wilderness, **“And the children of Israel said to them, “O, that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”(Exodus 16:3)** They murmured greatly against God and Moses; hence, just as God had reprimanded Adam, he reprimanded the children of Israel as well. Firstly, for the people who murmured the most, God plagued them with diseases that took the lives of thousands. They were then buried together in Sinai in graves, which were named ‘the graves of Hattavah’, meaning, ‘the graves of lust’. Those who died during that time were tossed into hades. Some of the remaining Israelites also murmured regarding the water they drank as well as the food they ate – in any case, only two of all the Israelites who left Egypt, were worthy enough to enter the Promised Land, those two were – Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh. Clearly, murmuring against God and breaking His commandments, is extremely

hazardous – even if it is regarding something simple. Some people say, ‘What if a fast approaches and we don’t fast?’ This is the breaking of God’s commandment. This is why during a fast, the church fathers announce to the congregation, that if any member is not fasting, they should not take Holy Communion. The reason being, is that the person who is not participating in the fast, is disobeying the church – because when the church announces that a fast will take place, we must fast, **“He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”** (Hebrews 5:8) In other words, we must obey the church – being obedient sons and daughters of the church. The person who does not fast is denied the partaking of Holy Communion. This way, that person can revise their situation and correct themselves by beginning to fast. After correcting their ways, keeping in mind that they care about their salvation, their eternity, and confessing their sins, only then are they able to take Holy Communion.

Although fasting comes across as a simple commandment, it is a very important one, and breaking it angers God. We saw how God punished Adam by death and how the children of Israel were punished in the wilderness to the point where they died in Sinai – only two were able to enter the Promised Land.

Ezekiel the prophet took his fasts very seriously, God said to Ezekiel, **“Also take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt; put them into one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself. During the number of days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat it.”** (Ezekiel 4:9) Ezekiel weighed specific portions of this bread and he ate the same bread for 13 consecutive months, **“And your food which you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from time to time you shall eat it.”** (Ezekiel 4:10)

When Abba Moses the strong began his spiritual journey, he wanted to lead a life of ascetism, so he broke off a wet branch from a tree and he said, “I will eat according to the weight of this branch, every day.” As the days progressed, this wet branch began to dry up gradually – hence, it was lighter in weight; nevertheless, the saint’s food decreased as the weight of the branch decreased. Eventually, the branch became very light in weight; subsequently, the saint’s food weighed much less. The saint did this in order to take control of his body and to bring it into subjection, because when the body is under control, the soul is constantly renewed.

One of the purposes of fasting is that it gives us a chance to grow spiritually, it gives the spirit a chance to thrive through the channels of grace and salvation. Fasting really helps the soul to flourish.

We recall how Daniel the prophet fasted along with the three friends, when the King of Babylon captured them after he besieged Jerusalem, “ **Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king’s descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king’s delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king. Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.**” (Daniel 1:3-6) Although the king offered them those delicacies, Daniel and His friends refused to taint themselves with this type of food. They discovered that these delicacies, which included various meats, came from sacrifices that were offered to idols; hence, according to the Hebrew laws they were not allowed to eat of those meats, otherwise they would be corrupting themselves, “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs. And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, “**I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who are your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king.**” So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, “**Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king’s delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants.**” So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days. And at the end of ten days their features appeared

better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies. Thus the steward took away their portion of delicacies and the wine that they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.” (Daniel 1:11-16)

In seeing that Daniel and his three friends were far healthier and much more presentable than those who dined on the king's account – from the king's delicacies, the king promoted them to serve in his court. When the king summoned for Daniel and his friends, he found them to be the best out of all the others. Therefore, Daniel and his friends were appointed to serve before the king. **“And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm.” (Daniel 1:20)** Despite the fact that Daniel and his three friends did not allow themselves to indulge in the king's delicacies, after ten days, they were found to be healthier than all the others, and they were promoted to serve before the king, even though they were initially captured by the king and forced to leave their land. Indeed, this is what happens when we obey God, God will sustain us and support us throughout our period of fasting. When we obey God, we receive very many blessings from Him. No matter what we ask of Him (heeding that our requests need to be reasonable and spiritual – giving glory to God), we will receive because we are keeping His commandments.

One day, Daniel encountered a problem, and as a result, he tells, **“I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.” (Daniel 10:3)** This meant that he was leading a very rigorous fast. This teaches us to eat modestly when we fast – to refrain from indulging in a variety of extravagant vegan dishes. After taking Holy Communion, break your fast by eating whatever food you get, from God's hands – it will be a blessing to you and it will be delicious. Even if the food is not delicious by nature, it will be, because you are eating it out of hunger and you will be grateful, because it is coming to you from God's hands.

When Daniel abstained from food for three weeks, he did not even eat at sundown. When God saw this, He sent Arch Angel Gabriel to him, and the angel said to him, **“O Daniel, man greatly beloved...” (Daniel 10:1)** Daniel was loved by God because he obeyed God. Daniel kept the laws of his forefathers and he obeyed the commandments. He used to worship God three times a day – he would open his windows and turn towards Jerusalem to pray, to worship, and to thank God. Despite the fact that Daniel was very busy with his responsibilities as

the king's chief administrator, he always made time for God, because worship is very important. The late Pope Shenouda III used to say, "If the heart is found, then the time will also be found." Some people claim that they have no time to pray at home, nor do they have time to attend the Holy Liturgy at church. His Holiness Pope Shenouda answers, "If the heart is found, the time will also be found." You can find the time to pray – if you save five minutes here and five minutes there, you will be able to say a prayer. The person who doesn't pray, cannot use lack of time as an excuse – the problem is concealed in the heart's lack of will power. Do not use time as an excuse, we have to pay attention to this point so that time does not steal us away in vain – which will ultimately lead us to drift away from God. I beseech you to draw near to God, because the ten minutes that you spend in prayer, are stored for you as a treasure in heaven. No matter how busy you are at work, your job is never going to be eternal; however, your prayers, your fasting, your good deeds, and your services are what will remain stored for you in heaven. As it is mentioned in the Bible, **"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."** **"Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."** (Revelation 14:13) Your good deeds will follow you to heaven, and you will hear the voice that says, **"Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."** (Matthew 25:23)

Isaiah the prophet spoke about fasting that is unacceptable to God, which the Jews pursued – it included lamentations and tears. God made it very clear that this is not an acceptable type of fasting. Acceptable fasting is composed of three parts:

1. Fasting with prayer
2. Giving our tithes
3. Having mercy on the poor

It is fasting that unbinds the ties of evil and sets the oppressed free. While fasting, we should feed the hungry, host the poor as well as who are lost, into our homes. If you see someone who is naked, clothe them; put the needs of others ahead of your own. In other words, do many good deeds during the period of fasting – because during this time, the window to heaven is open, and God will accept your offerings. In doing so, your light will shine as bright as the morning light.

In addition, fasting will speedily improve your health. Believe me, fasting is excellent for the general health. For those who aren't affected by diabetes or gastrointestinal issues, fasting is wonderful for their health. Fasting helps our bodies to be light, it enlightens our minds even more than when we are not fasting. Isaiah the prophet said, **“Your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you...”** (Isaiah 58:8) This will happen when we fast properly. Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah all spoke about fasting. In addition, Joel spoke about fasting and said, **“Consecrate a fast call a sacred assembly.”** (Joel 1:14) He was an advocate for fasting and prayer, consecrating a fast and calling a sacred assembly means to fast and pray. When fasting is accompanied by prayer, it gives the spirit a very strong boost. Believe me, fasting is the natural thing to do: His Holiness the late Pope Shenouda III said, “Our church consists of something natural and that is fasting.” The exception to that rule is when we are not fasting, simply because we fast for 9 months of the year – hence, we fast for a significant portion of the whole year. Our church is a church of ascetism – fasting and prayer are native to it, and the period of not fasting is the exception.

Nature in itself teaches us to fast: There are trees that fast during the winter time – in other words, they shed their leaves to the point where they look lifeless. However, as soon as spring arrives, the buds on those same trees begin to blossom into beautiful leaves and sometimes, fruits. There are also animals that fast, such as the camel that can walk in the desert and endure three weeks without any food or water. Also, various types of insects that go into winter hibernation bury themselves between the earth's rocks for the duration of winter – without eating or drinking anything. They do not leave their hibernation location until the weather begins to warm up. Also, various migrating birds tend to fast for a long time until they reach their new destination, where they will spend the winter months. Hence, even nature teaches us to fast.

Darius the king – a gentile, was forced to sign an edict to throw his beloved friend and chief administrator – Daniel into the lions' den. Darius could not bend the rule to save Daniel, because a king's decree is final. Nevertheless, Darius was extremely saddened, and the Bible tells us that he departed to his home and he remained fasting for the duration of that whole night – to the point where he did not even allow any of his wives to slumber with him. This teaches us that out of respect for the fast, people need to refrain from intimate relationships with their spouses. If Darius the heathen heeded this out of respect for the fast, then we who

were ordered by the church and the fathers' sayings should certainly heed it as well. During our fasting period, we need to lead a life of chastity, especially with regards to marital relationships. This way our fast will be complete. Our teacher St. Paul the Apostle says: **“That you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”** (1 Corinthians 7:35)

There is a significant difference between fasting in the Old Testament and fasting in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, fasting was accompanied by lamentation and tears, **“Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments...** (Joel 2:13) The people of the Old Testament did not fast unless they were faced with hardships. For example, the people of Nineveh fasted after Jonah came and informed them that their city would perish after 40 days – hence, they fasted. Esther and her people fasted when the king ordered that the Jews in his kingdom be killed. They did not have many fasts at the time, however, when they fell into various trials, they fasted – which was a good thing.

Throughout the New Testament, the various forms of worship that were mentioned by our Lord Jesus, were as follows: When you do a good deed, when you pray, and when you fast. Clearly, fasting is an essential part of worship and we need to fast with joy. A person should fast with joy especially because fasting revives the soul. The body almost suffocates the soul with food, drink, various desires, and the busy life schedule. A spiritual person is filled with joy when the fast approaches, they say: “Now is the time to shake off the rubble of laziness and start to receive a spiritual charge.” Hence, fasting should be joined by elation.

Our Lord Jesus said, **“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”** (Matthew 6:17-18) This means that you should look normal, without frowning or looking exhausted or weak – this is the literal meaning to what our Lord Jesus said. As for the spiritual meaning of the phrase, **“Anoint your head and wash your face...”** This refers to your inner senses – your mind and the cleanliness of your heart. As for us, we too should fast from all evil in purity and righteousness. It is important for us to fast with joy, to consider fasting as a form of group worship, not something that is forced onto us. Fasting is always an essential

part of rejuvenating and nourishing one's spiritual life – because fasting has many benefits. Fasting teaches us self control and it helps us to strengthen our will. Worshipping God in all its forms becomes a joyful experience during fasting. One becomes spiritually active and attends as many Holy Liturgies and church meetings as they can (depending on their time).

It is also important to keep in mind that we should not merely fast through the changing of food (from regular food to vegan food) – we need to understand the true spiritual meaning of fasting. We need to refrain from sinning and judging others, for the Holy Bible teaches us: **“First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”** (Matthew ٧:٥) So instead of pinpointing the sins of our brothers and judging them for those sins, we should focus more on our own sins. I should remove the plank, which is a symbol of sin, from my life so that my vision will become clearer and I can proceed with my spiritual life in the proper way. Fasting is also a way to rid ourselves of bad habits. Our teacher St. Paul Apostle states, **“But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!”** (Galatians ٥:١٥) So we should not dwell on the sins of others and we should not lose each other – if we are fasting from meats and dairy (as vegans), we should also fast from judging others. In other words, if I am fasting – only by refraining from eating certain foods, this will do me no good unless I fast spiritually from committing sins and other weaknesses.

When we begin to fast, we should aim to conclude the fast with a benefit(s). For example, aiming to stop a certain sin and trying to obtain a certain virtue. Fasting and praying, in addition to all the sermons that we listen to throughout the fasting period, and with the guidance of the father of confession – will ultimately help us to achieve our aim. It will help us to rid ourselves of a specific sin. Because any sin, whether great or small, can lead a person to perish: **“Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?”** (James ٤:١١-١٢) **“For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.”** (Romans ٤:١٤-١٥) I pray that we do not judge any situation before its time, and never judge solely based on

appearances. If we are required to judge, we should always judge fairly, and it would be even better if we refrained from judging altogether. Judge yourself before others judge you. If everyone judges themselves, then no one will have the capacity to judge anyone, and everyone would be living according to the commandment that comprises the simplest path leading to heaven.

May God bless your lives and may He benefit us through the blessings of the Holy Great Lent. Through the intercessions of our pure mother – St. Mary, and through the prayers of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, may you have many happy and peaceful returns. Amen.

Bishop Metaous

Abbot of the prosperous Syrian Monastery

٧th March ٢٠٠٩

٢٨th day of the Coptic month of Amshir, ١٧٦١

A HOLY JOURNEY - THE JOURNEY OF THE HOLY LENT

The church has divided the Holy Lent into seven weeks, each week begins with Monday and ends with Sunday. We can represent each one of the Sundays of the Great Lent as a station, where the traveller can rest in preparation for the continuation onto the next trip, etc.

When we look at the readings for each week of the Holy Lent, we notice that they are all centred on the persevering and repentant individuals in accepting the Saviour. On Sunday evenings during the Great Lent, a prayer is performed, however, this prayer is not considered as the Vespers Prayer for Monday morning. The reason being, is that its Gospel is a conclusion of the Gospel reading for the Liturgy of that particular Sunday. Clearly, this is opposite to the regular Vespers Prayers, where the Gospels that are recited in the evening, are completed by the reading in the Liturgy for the following day. The prayer of Sunday evening follows the same order as the Sunday Prime Raising of Incense. It may be worthy to note that the Katamaris is also read during this prayer. This prayer would take place prior to an evening church meeting, if there is one scheduled for that evening.

THE ORDER OF THE SUNDAYS OF THE GREAT LENT

The Pre-Lent Sunday (prior to the start of the Great Lent)

(Mathew ٢:١-١٨)

The Pre-Lent Sunday is the day when we should uplift ourselves above the bodily lusts that kill the soul, especially because on that day, everyone is under the impression that they should eat excessive amounts of delicacies and foods in preparation for the long fast that lies ahead. The church teaches us that the Pre-Lent Sunday, is a time to set aside all the non vegan foods and to uplift ourselves from all the bodily lusts – in all their forms, in order to prepare ourselves for the Holy Lent. The Coptic word that is used to name the Pre-Lent Sunday, is “*mojr`eqojn*”, which translates to a ‘belt’ or ‘to bind something’. It means that we should prepare ourselves for the fast that lies ahead.

In the military practice rounds, the soldiers tighten their belts and they wear the complete military attire and they arm themselves, as if ready to enter war. Similarly, during the Pre-Lent Sunday, we prepare ourselves spiritually, because we are about to enter a spiritual war – it is a time of concentrated spiritual

perseverance. We need to arm ourselves with spiritual armour, and the most important component of this armour, is fasting, or the ‘tightening of the belt’ so as to endure hunger. This is the definition of the Coptic word that names the Pre-Lent Sunday.

In English, the word ‘fast’ depicts fasting, and when we say, ‘Fasten your seatbelt’, this means we need to tighten the reins on ourselves and curb our desires. The church readings of the Pre-Lent Sunday are centred on the three forms of Christian worship, these are: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Since the believer is entering an important realm – the Holy Great Lent, the church sees it essential to remind the believer of the three forms of Christian worship and their conditions, through the readings of the Pre-Lent Sunday, **“And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”** (↯ Timothy ↯:Ⓞ) Therefore, we cannot fast without prayer, and we cannot pray without giving, because fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are intertwined – only then would our worship be complete.

We notice that our Lord Jesus mentions almsgiving first, prayer second, and fasting third; in other words, prayer is amidst almsgiving and fasting. We can liken prayer to a bird, the bird’s wings symbolise almsgiving and fasting. Since the bird cannot fly if one or both of its wings are broken, similarly, the prayers of the believer cannot ascend to heaven, nor enter into the Throne of Grace, nor will they be acceptable in front of God without the two ‘wings’; namely, almsgiving and fasting.

For every one of the three forms of worship, there are conditions that deem them acceptable to God.

↯. Conditions for Almsgiving:

- To be able to give alms with the spirit of love
- To choose to give alms as opposed to being forced into giving
- Whenever possible, to give in secret, without having a boastful spirit
- To give generously, each person according to their abilities
- To give with joy, because God loves a cheerful giver
- To give out of your own pocket, money that you have laboured to earn – not money that has been stolen, or received through bribery or gambling.
- To give out of loyalty to God and to know for a fact that you are giving to God in compensation for the many things that He gave to you. Keep in mind that what you have is from God, and you are giving back from what

He gave you, **“For all things *come* from You, And of Your own we have given You.”** (chronicles 29:14)

2. Conditions of a prayer that is acceptable to God:

- To have faith when you pray
- To be forgiving and loving
- Keeping God’s commandments
- To pray in the name of the Lord Jesus
- To perform acts of mercy, so that God may have mercy on us
- To participate in fasting
- To pray with fervency and perseverance

3. Conditions of a fast that is acceptable to God:

- Fasting that is accompanied by prayers
- Fasting that is accompanied by almsgiving
- Fasting that is accompanied by love
- Fasting that is accompanied by humility
- Fasting that is accomplished in secret
- Fasting that is accomplished by humbling oneself in front of God
- Fasting from various foods: physical fasting, needs to be accompanied by an accurate spiritual understanding of why we are fasting. “As for us, we too should fast from all evil in purity and righteousness.” (Fraction from the Lenten Liturgy)

The Psalm in the Holy Liturgy instructs us to: **“...be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.”** (Psalm 96:7-11) In other words, in order for our worship to be complete, and acceptable to God, it must be presented to God in reverence and fear. We need to stand in front of God and know for certain that He is truly present when we pray – He sees us and He hears us.

THE FIRST SUNDAY

The Sunday of Treasures (Matthew 6:19-33)

It seems that almsgiving is the most important form of Christian worship out of the three, especially because our Lord Jesus mentioned it in the Gospel of the Pre-Lent Sunday – this is why the church names that particular Sunday, the Sunday of treasures, after the verse, **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** (Matthew 6:19-21) The treasures that we lay for ourselves in heaven, are through almsgiving. When the poor bear all those gifts in our names, they deposit them in heaven’s bank – subsequently, our hearts joyfully drift to heaven behind our treasures, which are stored for us in heaven. In that same Gospel, our Lord Jesus warns us about the love of money and the worshipping of money – He described the love of money as a pagan god who pushes away the worshipers from worshipping the true God. It leads people to worship idols, because the love of money as well as greed, is the worshipping of idols that drowns people into perdition. Throughout this Gospel, our Lord Jesus directs our attention to the Kingdom of Heaven and He asks us to seek it always as opposed to seeking what is of this world,

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” (Matthew 6:33) Our Lord Jesus also asks us not to pay too much attention to worldly cares, when He says, **“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on.”** (Matthew 6:25) When a child lives in his parent’s house, he does not worry about what he will eat or what he will wear, because all these things are provided for him by his parents, even without his asking. Similarly, if we count on God and we strive to ask for the Kingdom of Heaven, God will take care of us and He will give us our daily bread even with the slightest effort from our part, “...that we too, having sufficiency in everything always, may abound in every good deed.” (Liturgy of St. Basil)

The source of fear, anxiety, disturbances, and the person’s inability to enjoy a peaceful heart through God, is due to the excessive attention that we are paying to all of our worldly needs and wants – which are vain: **“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”** What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:2) and **“For what**

profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26) Observe what happened to Lot’s wife, whose heart lingered in the evil Sodom and Gomorrah. Let us meditate on the punishment of the foolish rich man, who died on the same night that he longed for happiness on earth. Also, we recall the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira – who lied to St. Peter the Apostle, because of their love for money. Fasting is the soul’s opportunity to salvage and purify itself from the love of earthly things. It allows us to ascend to God’s love and to seek the Kingdom of Heaven with all our might, “Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.” (Matthew 11:20)

THE SECOND SUNDAY

The Sunday of Temptation and Victory (Matthew 4:1-11)

Throughout this week, the church presents our Lord Jesus Christ to us, on the Mount of Temptation. He was led by the Holy Spirit and He was fasting while being one with the Father. Satan was tempting him with all forms of temptation, **“Being tempted for 40 days by the devil, and in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry. And the devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God command this stone to become bread...Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish, therefore if You will worship before me, all will be yours...Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you, and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone...” (Luke 4:2-3, 5-7, 9-11)** The devil tempted our Lord Jesus with the lust of the body, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Satan tried to instill doubt in Christ that He was the Son of God. He tempted Christ without despair and then he parted with Him until a later time, **“Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.” (Luke 4:13)** However, our Lord Jesus Christ, glory be to Him, overcame all of Satan’s temptations in order to teach us how to be victorious our Satan and over all his wiles. The defense system that our Lord Jesus used against Satan, consists of:

١. Being filled with the Holy Spirit
٢. Fasting
٣. Prayer and unity with the Father
٤. The powerful and living word of God: **“Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”** (Ephesians ٦:١١-١٣)

We must keep in mind that Satan will never despair: **He left our Lord Jesus for the time being – Luke ٤:١٣.** Satan returned through St. Peter’s tongue when he said to our Lord, **“Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!”** **But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an offence to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”**” (Matthew ١٦:٢٢-٢٣) and **“Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”** (Matthew ١٢:٣٢)

Then Satan spoke yet again through the thief on the left hand side of our Lord Jesus when He was on the cross, **“Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.”** (Luke ٢٣:٣٩). Another instance when Satan’s words resonated, occurred through the words of the Roman Soldier, **“And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.”** (Luke ٢٣:٣٥) Satan will never rest and will never cease to tempt us – his primary goal is to cause us to fall and perish. He is extremely perseverant, to the point where he was able to taunt a monk for the duration of ٤٠ consecutive years. Our Lord Jesus was victorious on our behalf, and He gave us the authority to be victorious, to the point where the angels would minister to us just as they had ministered to Him after His victory over Satan, **“Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.”** (Matthew ٤:١١) and **“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”** (James ١:١٢)

The first of the steps to victory is for us to be able to gain triumph over our bodies and our souls: **“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection,**

lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

(**1 Corinthians 9:27**) In the Old Testament, Satan tempted the children of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years and he managed to conquer them. The reason being, is that they murmured against God and Moses. They murmured even though God was present amidst them and they were doubtful of God's promises to them. The children of Israel fell into sin and stubbornness; hence, they died and perished. However, in the New Testament, Satan kept tempting our Lord Jesus Christ for 40 days in the wilderness, with all forms of temptation; nevertheless, our Lord was victorious over him – Satan was defeated and his strength was destroyed. The victory of our Lord Jesus became an inheritance for us – a bridge for us to walk upon to His light. Our Lord Jesus was tempted just as we are, but although He was tempted, He did not sin, **“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”** (**Hebrews 4:15**) Through being tempted, He crushed all temptations and He was victorious in the wilderness. Our Lord Jesus trampled upon death with His death on the cross – granting us victory and life and the ability to savour His glory.

The readings on this particular Sunday are centred on victory over temptations through our Lord Jesus Christ who conquered Satan, saying, **“Get behind me, Satan...”** (**Mark 8:33**) Also, Arch Angel Michael said, **“The Lord rebuke you!”** (**Jude 1:9**) We are also able to say, “May God denounce you, O Satan.” This way he will free from us through the power of Christ who lives in us. For the Apostle instructs us saying, **“Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”** (**James 4:7**)

THE THIRD SUNDAY

The Sunday of the Prodigal Son

(Luke 15:11-32)

The Great Lent is an advocate of repentance and returning to God, and during this Sunday, the church presents the Prodigal son to us – as an example of repentance. It was through his friends of bad influences that Satan lured him to leave his father. He travelled to a faraway land and he threw himself into the arms of the world. He wasted all his money and he searched for freedom and happiness, of which he found none – instead, he found hunger, nakedness and oppression, until he returned to his senses. After that he decided to return to his father and to

give a genuine repentance. Indeed, he left the swine and the bad influences, and he confessed his sin in front of his father. His father accepted him with joy and they celebrated his return with an extravagant feast. Similarly our Heavenly Father is filled with joy when we repent and return to Him, for He does not wish the death of a sinner, but that he repents and lives. Furthermore, the angels also rejoice when a sinner returns, it is just as our Lord said, **“Likewise, I say to you, “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.””** (Luke 15:10)

The readings of this day are centered on the acceptance of repentance. The Vespers Gospel warns of the immoral language that man speaks of, and this is against repentance. The morning offering of incense Gospel speaks of the people of the eleventh hour who were accepted. The Gospel for the Liturgy tells of the father’s acceptance of his repenting son. The Pauline Epistle states: **“For He says: “In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you.”** (1 Corinthians 13:2) Also, the Catholic Epistle urges of the importance of controlling the tongue as a significant aspect of repentance. The Praxis (the Acts of the Apostles) urges us to hold steadily to the truth and to refrain from causing others to stumble. As for the Vespers Gospel, it tells of repentance and obedience, which allowed the tax collectors and the adulterers to inherit the kingdom of God.

THE FOURTH SUNDAY

The Sunday of the Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42)

In addition to presenting us with a male figure for repentance, the church also presented us with a female figure for repentance – that is, the Samaritan woman. It was critical for our Lord Jesus to visit Samaria. Our Lord’s encounter with the Samaritan woman was not a coincidence – in fact, there are no coincidences in our lives, everything happens with God’s good will or God’s permission. Our Lord’s encounter with the Samaritan woman was one of His goals for His journey. Our Lord’s journey began in the southern part of Judea, all the way to northern part of Galilee – in between those two cities was Samaria. Our Lord Jesus walked for six whole hours until He became exhausted; as a result, he sat down to rest beside the well. In addition, He was thirsty, so He asked for water from the first lady that came to drink from the well. Our Lord Jesus was also hungry, so His disciples went to the city to find Him some food. It was our Lord Jesus who began the

conversation with the Samaritan woman, for it is He who continuously makes the initiative to work with us – to draw us to salvation, this is because of His great love for us. Even though our Lord Jesus was thirsty, hungry, and tired, he endured the Samaritan woman’s irritability with patience, until she learned more about Him, “Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, **“How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”** (John 4:9) Our Lord found a beautiful virtue about this woman – her honesty, so He concentrated on that wonderful virtue and He praised her. This aided the Samaritan woman in retreating from her irritable attitude and listening to what our Lord Jesus had to say – in addition to slowly being uplifted in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. Our Lord Jesus said to her, **“Go, call your husband, and come here.”** (John 4:16) He said this, despite the fact that He knew that she did not have a husband and that she was leading a life of adultery with the man whom she currently lived with. The Samaritan woman said, **“I have no husband...”** (John 4:17) She was completely honest and this is why our Lord praised her, **“You have well said, ‘I have no husband’ ...”** (John 4:17)

No matter how evil a person may be, God gave every single person a beautiful virtue. If we wipe away the soil of sin from around us and we search around for our virtue, we will find it and extract it. It is this virtue that will rejuvenate each and every one of us, restoring our lost humanity and dignity to us. It would be the start of a new era for us, as we harvest our virtues in addition to doing good.

Our Lord Jesus saved the Samaritan woman from the well of lusts. She became a preacher, preaching in His name. Our Lord also saved Matthew from the love of money – he became an Apostle and he wrote a Gospel. Our Lord saved Paul from being consistently outraged. Paul’s wrongful zeal led him to make misinformed decisions; however, through God’s grace, he preached and served in Jerusalem and its surrounding cities – all the way to the cities of Macedonia that were in the heart of Europe. St. Paul then completed preaching the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

The readings of this day are centred on the “strength of the Gospel”. The Vespers Gospel teaches us to seek the kingdom of heaven and to refrain from worrying excessively about worldly cares. The offering of incense Gospel speaks of the wedding that is prepared for those who are ready and deserving of it. The Gospel of the Liturgy speaks of the living water that quenches those who are thirsty for righteousness. The Pauline Epistle asks us to put on the armour of

God's word, which is stronger than any two-edged sword. The Catholic Epistle asks us to submit to God and to resist the devil, after which he will flee from us. The Praxis (Acts of the Apostles) speaks to us about the strength of those who put the words of the Bible into practice and who are holding fast to them, just as St. Paul the Apostle did in front of the Jews and the Romans. The evening Gospel speaks about bowing down to God and worshipping him in spirit and in truth, because God longs for those who love Him and worship Him.

THE FIFTH SUNDAY

The Sunday of the Paralyzed Man (John 5:1-14)

On this Sunday, the church presents the Gospel of the man who was paralyzed for 38 years. This man symbolises the sinner who is tortured and drained by sin, to the point where it paralyzed him. The pool of Bethsaida or the 'pool of mercy' was present, and whoever entered the pool after the angel stirred the water, was healed from their diseases. This was because of God's mercy for those who were ill with difficult and terminal diseases. The pool of Bethsaida can be likened to a 'hospital' that consisted of five sections, each section was a symbol of a person's five senses. If we leave our senses unattended without control, they will become afflicted with spiritual illnesses. In that event, one would need to go to the spiritual hospital (the pool of Bethsaida or the pool of divine mercy), to obtain a cure for the ailing senses.

The man who was paralyzed for 38 years was extremely delayed in being healed and saved – he remained bedridden, the reason being, is that he depended on people to help him, **“Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up...” (John 5:7)** He asked for anyone to help him enter the Pool of Bethsaida – the pool of blessings; however, no one helped him. When he lost all hope in people, the Son of Man came to save him from his disease and from his despair. The duration of 38 years symbolizes the 38 centuries when the Israelites awaited the Saviour – until He came and saved them. The number 38 also symbolizes the 38 years that the children of Israel spent in the Wilderness of Sinai, between the two years when they left Egypt until they entered the land of Canaan. Just as Moses the prophet said, **“And the time we took to come from Kadesh Barnea until we crossed over the valley of Zered was 38 years...” (Deuteronomy 2:14)**

Our Lord Jesus asked the paralyzed man a question that may seem strange: “Do you want to be healed?” Then we may ask ourselves: Is there anyone who does not want to be healed? However, our Lord Jesus Christ wanted to put us as well as this man, in front of the greatest reality – our salvation and our healing from the diseases of sin by our choice and our will. He came to save us and He completed all that was required in order to ensure our salvation; nevertheless, we can only enjoy this salvation by our own will. The person’s will power is the primary element in their salvation. God gave us the grace of free will and he saved us from Satan’s slavery and bondage. God would never want to rob us of our free will or our freedom – He does not even want to pressure us. When we accept Christ’s commandments and His advice with our own free will, we will obtain healing and salvation just as the paralyzed man did. When he heeded the words of Christ, Christ said to him, **“Jesus said to him, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk.’”** (John 5:8) Immediately after Christ’s words, the man was healed – he held up his bed and walked. This man wanted to be healed, however, his willpower alone without God’s will, would not do him any good. True healing, is for our will to accept the work of Christ’s grace and the strength of His salvation.

Sin was the reason behind this man’s prolonged illness – 38 years, therefore, our Lord said to him, **“See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worst thing come upon you.”** (John 5:14) and **“Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths; for she has cast down many wounded, and all who were slain by her were strong men.”** (Proverbs 9:20-26) Repenting from sin and partaking in the Holy Sacraments bestows healing upon us, both psychologically, physically, and spiritually. This ill man had no one to care for him, **“Sir, I have no man...”** (John 5:7) However, our Lord Jesus Christ took care of him personally. He approached him at the Pool of Bethesda in order to heal him – our Lord cares for those who have no one to care for them.

Also, this chapter vividly reveals the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ to us, for He healed the man who had this detrimental disease – with one word. In addition, He said to the Jews: **“My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.”**(John 5:17) And in the verse of John 5:18, **“Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.”** Our Lord Jesus indicated that God is His Father, thus equaling Himself to God.

The readings of the Sunday of the paralytic are centred on the strengthening of the Gospel (the word of God) to the believer. The Vespers Gospel speaks of how God retrieves justice to those who are unjustly accused; furthermore, He hears their cries (just as He heard the cries of the widow and the ruler of darkness). The Gospel for the morning offering of incense illustrates a divine promise of the heavens, to those who obey the word of God, (like the vine and the vinedressers). The Gospel for this Sunday teaches us that the word of God strengthens people just as it strengthened the paralytic man when he obeyed God's word and advice. The Pauline Epistle asks the believers to be steadfast in faith. The Catholic Epistle clarifies that God does not want anyone to perish, He wants everyone to accept repentance, righteousness, and holiness. The Praxis (Acts of the Apostles) asks the believers to withstand pain on behalf of God and in serving the church. Throughout the Vespers Gospel, God announces His acceptance of those who repent. He also bestows healing upon them from sin, just as He healed the paralyzed man who was brought by his four friends.

THE SIXTH SUNDAY

The Sunday of Baptism (John 9)

This Sunday is named after baptism because in the olden days, during the Great Lent, the church used to baptize people who were entering the faith after teaching them the foundations of the Christian faith. This tradition is kept even until this day, as many believers prefer to baptize their children in the Sunday of baptism. The reason being, is that baptism is spiritual enlightenment. An example of this enlightenment is illustrated to us through the blind man who received his sight, when he obeyed the words of Christ, who said to him, "Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam..." This particular Sunday is also referred to as the 'Sunday of Enlightenment' by the Gospel, the Word of God.

This man was blind since birth – he had no eyes altogether and this is why the Lord Jesus created two brand new eyes for him, from the same material – mud or dust, with which He created the first man. This is proof of the strength and the divinity of our Master Jesus Christ, in that He is God who created man from the dust of the earth, **"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into His nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."** (Genesis 2:7)

This blind man symbolizes the human race, which was blinded by sin. Man could no longer see the light of Christ and strayed far from the straight path, which leads to eternal life. This blind man was also poor, and he sat by the gate of the altar to beg for money from those who passed by. Our Lord Jesus took great care of him – this teaches us also to take care of the poor and to give them from the blessings which God gave us. This poor blind man was obedient, he allowed our Lord Jesus to place the mud onto his face (in the area where his eyes are supposed to be), without any objections. He obeyed when our Lord Jesus when He commanded him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam.

Faith and obedience are the reason why this miracle took place, and the man was able to regain his physical sight, as well as his spiritual sight. This man was pure and he feared God; he was also cautious so as not to judge anyone. When the Jews spoke negatively about our Lord Jesus, saying that He was a sinner, not of God, and that He did not honour the Sabbath, the man who was blind answered: **“Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see...”** (John 9:25) We know very well that God does not listen to sinners; however, if people fear God and do His will, He listens to them. It is from this great man that we learn not to judge others, and we should not participate with anyone in judging anyone. This man was very brave, he did not fear the Jews who bothered him with all their questions, and when they saw his courage and the logical way by which he defended Christ, they rebuked him. They then kicked him out of the Jewish community – they denied him all of his religious rights. They felt that He broke the Jewish law – this way neither his friends nor his family would be able to defend him, otherwise they too would become excommunicated from the Jewish community. Nevertheless, God the Just Judge, would never let this man be condemned unjustly. When our Lord heard about how this innocent man was unjustly accused, He searched everywhere for him, and when He found him, the following dialogue occurred: **“Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, ‘Do you believe in the Son of God?’ He answered and said, ‘Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?’ and Jesus said to him, ‘You have both seen Him, and it is He who is talking with you.’ Then he said, ‘Lord, I believe!’ and he worshipped Him.”** (John 9:35-38) Hence, God bestowed further grace upon him and He granted him the gift of physical sight as well as the gift of spiritual sight. God lifted him up to a level of faith that was much needed, for without this faith God cannot be content, nor can His commandments be obeyed.

Anyone who is baptized by water and by the Holy Spirit and anointed with the Holy Myron oil (Holy Chrismation oil), will receive spiritual enlightenment from God. Only then can we enter into the community of faith, and there we will receive the Holy Spirit who will teach us all things – leading us through the path to eternal life.

The readings of this Sunday are centered on the enlightenment of the Gospel, as well as baptism. During the Vespers Gospel, our Saviour teaches the believers to enter through the narrow gate, the door of abiding according to the commandments and the promises of baptism. This includes the denouncing of Satan and putting on the new robe of righteousness. During the morning offering of incense Gospel (Matthew ٢٣), our Lord Jesus warns about the arrogance of the Pharisees and the scribes, because arrogance is against the spiritual life. During the Liturgy's Gospel, our Lord teaches us that after accepting His words, and being washed in baptism, this illuminates our spiritual vision and it steers us to walk in the light, "I was blind, but now I see..." St. Paul the Apostle alerts us that, we have removed our 'old selves' along with sin and put on the new robes of righteousness – through baptism becoming one with Christ and sons of one baptism. This way we should not be boastful over one another and we should not return to the acts of the old person, doing evil. The Catholic Epistle consoles us that we have eternal life and hope in the name of the Son of God. The Praxis (Acts of the Apostles) speaks to us about God's consolation to all believers during their time of trouble, or the tribulations that they encounter. God promises us that not one hair from our heads shall fall without His permission. The Vespers Gospel speaks to us about God's compassion for the believer, just as He had compassion on the blind man of Bethsaida and He healed his eyes.

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY

Palm Sunday – The Entry of our Lord Jesus into Jerusalem ***(Matthew ٢١:١-١٧)***

The readings of Palm Sunday are included amongst the readings for Passion Week. Palm Sunday is unique for the following reasons:

١. It is a Major feast of our Lord
٢. During the morning offering of incense, a procession is made with the cross, and ١٢ Gospels are read. The procession of the cross takes place because as we walk around the church with the cross, we chant, 'Hosanna, save us...'

as we recall our salvation and we hold strong to it. The cross is our way of salvation – it is the means by which our Lord Jesus completed Salvation for the whole world.

- ϣ. The Palm Sunday Liturgy is the only Liturgy throughout the year where ε Gospels are recited instead of one. All four Gospels tell of the same event – this emphasizes the importance of the event of Palm Sunday. Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, mention Christ’s entry into Jerusalem:

St. Matthew: St. Matthew mentions the multitude that was present, as they chanted, saying: **“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** (Matthew 21:9) They said they shook the whole city.

St. Mark: St. Mark mentions the entry of Christ into Jerusalem as a humble King according to the prophecy of Zachariah, **“Rejoice greatly O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** (Zachariah, 9:9) He also speaks about peace for all nations, as well as God’s authority, **“His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from river to the ends of the earth...”** (Zachariah 9:10)

St. Luke: St. Luke mentions Christ’s weeping for Jerusalem, as well as Christ’s Prophecy for its destruction, because Jerusalem did not know that He came for its salvation.

St. John: St. John mentions the chanting of the multitude for our Lord Jesus, as well as the Pharisees’ murmurs towards the chanting multitude. He also mentions that the Pharisees feared Christ and wanted to arrest Him.

- ε. After the Holy Liturgy on Palm Sunday, a general funeral prayer is recited. All those who are attending are sprinkled with water, this way, if anyone departs during Passion Week, the church refrains from praying the usual funeral prayer because it is unfitting to offer incense on the Paschal Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday. Instead, a special prayer for those who depart during Passion Week is recited (this prayer is available in the church books). If the person who departed did not attend the sprinkling of the water on Palm Sunday, the priest sprinkles some of the left over water that he saves from that day, especially for this purpose. In addition, the church does not pray any Liturgies to commemorate the departed, during Passion Week.

Our Lord Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem as a King over our hearts, just as He requested: **“My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe My ways.”** (Proverbs ٢٣:٢٦) People took the hearts of the palms which were white in colour and they greeted our Lord Jesus with joyful hearts. This is why even until this day, on Palm Sunday we say, ‘Your heart is white, O Christian’. Are our hearts truly pure and white so that they may be worthy to welcome Christ? Some people took olive branches, and they too greeted Christ with them. Olives are a symbol of peace, and our Lord Jesus is the King of Peace, entering Jerusalem. He is the King of Peace and the head of peace who speaks peacefully to all nations, as He says, **“My peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.”** (John ١٤:٢٧) Olive oil is used throughout our worship and our church sacraments. We are presenting the Lord with complete worship, pure, acceptable, and deep, this way it becomes a favourable fragrance to Him. Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt – the foal of the donkey, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me.” He rode the donkey on the rugged and sloping paths because the donkey is strong and can withstand this difficult path. He rode on the colt of the donkey on the smooth paths. The donkey symbolises the Hebrew nation whose people were trained according to the laws and the prophets. The colt of the donkey symbolises the nations whom our Lord called to Himself for the first time, to bear His yolk – they are new to the faith and to knowing God.

The multitudes cried out saying, **“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** (Matthew ٢١:٩) These were all chants that praised our Lord Jesus, the Saviour who is worthy of all glory and praise, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” This phrase was chanted by the multitudes as they welcomed Christ into Jerusalem. This phrase will also be chanted by those who are saved during the second coming, **“See! Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly I say to you, you shall not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”**(Luke ١٣:٣٥) We also recite this phrase twice during communion time:

١. During the first time, the priest lifts up the tray that holds the body of Christ and turns to the left side towards the congregation; in seeing this, the congregation chants with a loud voice, saying, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” This is a symbol of the first coming.

٢. The priest then places the tray down onto the altar for a moment and then he lifts it up, anointing the congregation from the right hand side as he says, “The holy Body, and the precious and true Blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of our God. Amen.” The congregation then responds by saying, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” This is a symbol of Christ’s second coming.

The first coming comes in the form of weakness, and that is why the priest anoints the congregation from the left hand side. When the priest places the tray on the altar for a moment, this symbolises the time between the first and second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The second coming will come in a mighty way, **“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”** (Matthew ١٦:٢٧)

Even amidst all the glorious festivities that took place through greeting Christ, He did not stray from His work as a Saviour. He looked at the city that was drowning in its evils and He cried for it, because Satan had blinded the city – its people were unable to see Christ, being the saviour who would come to save them. It is very important to note that God wants everyone to be saved, **“Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”** (١ Timothy ٢:٤) Christ cries over those who refuse to accept Him as Saviour or those who are busy with other things – hence, they perish.

When our Lord Jesus entered the altar, He purified it from all impurities – exchanging currencies, noise, and the making of purchases, because God’s house is a house of prayer. May we allow God to purify our hearts from all impurities, so that we may become palaces that are worthy to be homes for God – instead of Satan residing in our hearts, with the lusts of the world. This way we are ready to be saved – by the salvation which Christ came and fulfilled for us.

After the completion of the Palm Sunday Holy Liturgy, the general funeral prayer begins. A large bowl full of water is brought in the Chorus area of the church and the prayer is recited. The following is recited: A prophecy from the book of Ezekiel (٣٧:١-١٤) is recited. Then the Pauline Epistle (St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians ١٥:١-٢٣) tells us about the Resurrection of the dead. Afterwards, Psalm (٦٤:٤-٥) is recited, and finally, the Gospel according to St.

John (๑:๑๑-๑๓) which tells of the final judgement. All of these readings are recited in the melancholy melody; in addition, the prayer of the departed is recited and the prayers are concluded like the conclusion of the Paschal prayers. The priest then sprinkles the congregation with the water that was prayed upon. It is through these rites that we remind ourselves and live in the moment of the Lord's death, **“Yes we have descendants of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.”** (๑ **Corinthians** ๑:๓) This way, we experience death with Christ so that we may also live with Him, according to the teachings of our teacher St. Paul the Apostle, **“This is a faithful saying: for we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him.”** (๑ **Timothy** ๒:๑๑-๑๒) He also said, **“That I may know Him and the power of His Resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. If, by any means, I may attain to the Resurrection from the dead.”** (**Philippians** ๓:๑๐-๑๑) and **“Who himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes you were healed.”** (๑ **Peter** ๒:๒๔) and **“Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.”** (๑ **Corinthians** ๔:๑๐) The believers leave the church with this rich prayer. Afterwards, they will immerse themselves even more by participating in the death of Christ, their Good Saviour with all their conscience and love – for He died on their behalf and rose.

After the priest sprinkles us with the water from the funeral prayer, we come in contact with the death of our Lord, after we wipe our faces with it, we become drenched with the touch of His death and we rise with His Resurrection, **“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”** (**Colossians** ๓:๑) The body then becomes crucified from all lusts and desires and it lives by the spirit, **“And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”** (**Galatians** ๑:๒๔) This way, we can conquer death and live victoriously as we gain the Kingdom of Heaven.

THE SUNDAY OF RESURRECTION

(John 20:1-18)

This is the final station or the station of arrival from our gradual and blessed journey to God. Between Palm Sunday (the seventh station) and the Sunday of Resurrection (the eighth or the last Sunday), comes the arrival of the rich Passion week with its high spiritual aura. During this time, we spend most of the day in church partaking in various readings, prayers, prostrations, sermons and hymns that are all centred on the sufferings of Christ our great Saviour. Christ was crucified for us and He opened Paradise for us— indeed, this is the most revered and holiest time of the whole year. Passion Week ends by the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus and His burial in the tomb. We remain in waiting even up to Joyous Saturday as we await the great celebration on the dawn of Sunday morning, which is the Sunday of the Resurrection. It is the most glorious feast in all of Christianity, and we refer to it as the Great Feast, which comes after the Great Lent.

We should not celebrate the feast of the Resurrection merely as a historical event, we should celebrate it as if it occurred in us on the same day. We need to celebrate our Resurrection with Christ, from some or all of our sins, and our weaknesses. The Apostle tells us, **“Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light.”** (Ephesians 5:14) Our Lord Jesus Christ gave light to those who were in the darkness of hades and the shadow of death. He broke the bonds of steel and He moved the brass doors. He saved all those who died on the hope of salvation, He brought them out of hades and into the newly opened Paradise.

After Christ rose to heaven, He sat at the right hand of His Father. The Apostle advises us to follow His footsteps so that we too may rise from our sins and resurrect with Him to heaven, with our thoughts and our longings – that our eyes may be attached to Him. The Apostle says, **“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”** (Colossians 3:1-3)

The Resurrection of Christ is the strength of the church, the strength of the new life which He gave to us when He trampled death for us and on our behalf. He conquered Satan, the enemy of our salvation. The feast of the Resurrection is a

new opportunity of strength for our Resurrection, which we have taken in baptism when we were buried with Christ in the water of the baptism. Just as Christ rose from amongst the dead, we too are now able to dwell in the new life, the life of victory over sin, victory over Satan, victory over our bodies, and victory over this world with all that is in it, from, **“...the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...”** (1 John 2:16) **“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”** (Romans 6:4)

The Resurrection of Christ is the essence for preaching, for when St. Peter the Apostle asked for the appointing of another Apostle instead of Judas Iscariot, he said, **“Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His Resurrection.”** (Acts 1: 21-22)

The day on which our Lord Jesus rose from the church is known as ‘Kyriaky day’, which means, the day of the Lord – Sunday. This is the day when the church celebrates the Eucharist during the Divine Liturgy. Regarding this day, the Psalmist prophesied saying, **“This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.”** (Psalm 118:24) The Apostle also says: **“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** (1 Corinthians 15:20) But how can He become the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep if others before him had risen from the dead. Elijah the prophet brought a dead person back to life and Elisha the prophet brought some dead people back to life. Christ Himself brought many people back to life, including Lazarus, and the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus; nevertheless, Christ is the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep, from three angles:

1. Our Lord Jesus rose from the dead and there was no death afterwards, in contrast, those who rose before Him, died a second time.
2. Christ rose with His own ability and His own will, whereas those who rose before Him, were brought to life by people other than themselves.
3. Christ rose with a glorified body, whereas those who rose before him rose with their same regular bodies – which were susceptible to diseases, tiredness, and death, **“But each one in his own order: Christ the first**

fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. (1 Corinthians 15:23)

During the final Resurrection – during the second coming, the Lord will transform our carnal bodies that are made of dust, to be conformed to His glorious body, but how? **“Who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” (Philippians 3:21)** Whatever is impossible with man is possible with God. The Resurrection of Christ solved many problems that the disciples, as well as the church as a whole were experiencing, such as:

1. The issue of fear
2. The issue of doubt
3. The issue of sadness
4. The issue of hopelessness and despair
5. The issue of death

Let us rise with Christ, from the graves of our sins that we may resurrect with Him with our hearts, our eyes, our minds, and our longings. Let us heed the advice of the Apostle who says: **“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Colossians 3:1)**

I would like to wish the whole church, many happy and peaceful returns

Amen.