

*Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching, and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself crying: Holy, Holy, Holy, art Thou, O our God, Through the Theotokos have mercy on us.*

When I was younger I thought that talk about the Last Judgment (whether personal or universal) was something from a different, less enlightened, phase of Church history. I believed that the fired up TV preachers who ranted on about hell-fire and damnation were throw-backs to darker and crueler times. Surely God would not condemn a person because he or she failed to repent of a particular behavior or attitude or set of beliefs! After all, He made us and He loves us, how could He possibly shut us out of His Kingdom simply for “being human”? I had, as I’ve since come to learn, an inadequate understanding of both the power of sin and the magnitude of human freedom.

If we make a point of reading the Holy Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, on a daily basis along with the teachings of the holy fathers of the Church we will be struck by just how clear our Lord, Jesus Christ, is in His teaching about the Last Judgment. He leaves no doubt that the ultimate place in eternity of each and every one of us is very much tied up with our behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. In fact, He is dreadfully clear about His expectations and about what will happen to us if we fail to heed them. This is not the ‘faith’ of many—if not most—modern Christians. And that in itself is frightening.

Most modern people—meaning people living in the affluent and comfortable societies of North America and Europe—spend little time examining their consciences and reflecting on eternity. They are simply too busy, too caught up with the “cares of this world” to concern themselves with the next. If Jesus is to be taken at his word, this is a very dangerous assumption. As the Bridegroom Hymn (based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in the gospel of St. Matthew, 25:1-13) makes clear, if we are caught unaware when the day of Judgment comes we will be shut out of the Kingdom. It is that simple.

Of course, Judgment Day comes to each of us when we die. Yes, there is the great judgment at the end of the ages, but for you and me the only judgment that matters is the one that is passed on us as the result of our own faith and actions (the two are inseparable). Far too much attention has been paid to the images we find in the various “apocalypses” of the stars falling from the sky, the sun being darkened, and the world perishing in fire. The grim reality is that EACH of us faces a personal judgment for the life we’ve lived and the faith we have held (or betrayed). This is what is meant by the “dread (or awesome) judgment seat of Christ” that we hear mentioned so often in the litanies during the Divine Liturgy and other services of the Church. It is about our personal encounter with the Lord at the end of (our) days. There is no such thing as a mass judgment—at least not in the Orthodox Christian understanding of the Scriptures. Everything is personal.

The greatest danger we face is not our tendency to sin, but our tendency to be inattentive—to be spiritually asleep. If we sin and repent, we will be forgiven. But if we are ‘asleep’ in our sins—meaning, if we are in such a spiritual torpor that we are not even aware of them—we are in the greatest danger. If we are so indifferent to eternal life that we have for all practical purposes forgotten it and if we are so indifferent to the gift of salvation that the Savior offers us that we would trade it for any earthly pleasure—great or small, then how can we expect anything other than to be ‘locked out’? We have already made a choice about what is most important to us—and it isn’t the Kingdom of God.

The wonderful grace of the season of Holy Lent is that it provides us a spiritual wake up call. If we are even a little bit aware of the message this beautiful and, in our Orthodox Tradition, deeply joyful season, we will see in it an invitation to reset our priorities and to reorient our hearts towards something much greater than anything this world can offer. Indeed, the Church sings of the Great Fast (the proper name for the season) as a time of joy:

*“Let us begin the Fast with joy. Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts. Let us cleanse our souls. Let us cleanse our flesh. Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods, taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit and accomplishing them in love that we all may be made worth to see the passion of Christ our God and His Holy Pascha, rejoicing with spiritual joy.” (Forgiveness Sunday Vespers)*

This is our “wake-up call” to be ready for the Bridegroom when He comes. This is the prescription we are given for re-orienting our lives towards eternity. It is not, in truth, something which is limited to the Lenten season; it is meant to become a way of life. Lent just gives us an added push in the direction of becoming truly spiritually awake and prepared to stand before the “awesome judgment seat of Christ”. The season of the Fast awakens in us the desire to change, to repent, to turn our hearts toward what really matters, the “pearl of great price” that never loses its value.

In the end, a real and permanent spiritual awakening is grounded in love. And, as anyone who has ever experienced love knows, this requires a willingness to work diligently to find ways to express what we feel for our beloved. There is no better expression of love for Christ, the Bridegroom and His Kingdom than the words of the prayer of St. Ephrem—said as part of virtually every Lenten service:

*“O Lord and Master of my life, do not give me a spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power and idle talk! But give rather a spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Your servant! Yea, O Lord and King grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother, for blessed are You to the ages of ages. Amen”*

If we were to actualize this prayer in our lives, we would truly be awake and our place in the Kingdom would be guaranteed.