

## THE FORTH SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT (Mark 9:17-31)

The Forth Sunday of Great lent is teaching us about both the power and strength of prayer and fasting. In today's Gospel reading we heard of a father who brings his son, possessed by a certain spirit from childhood, to Jesus. **"Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not."** After hearing this, Christ reacts very strongly. With sharp and powerful words He addresses everybody there: **"O faithless generation, how long shall a bear with you? Bring him to Me."** Why does Jesus react this way? He can see that this father and his son have no connection to God, and that is the reason why they have fallen under the influence of an unclean spirit. **"Then they brought the boy to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And often he has thrown himself both into the fire and into the water to destroy himself. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."** It is obvious that the father doesn't believe in Christ. His words directed to Christ: "If you can do anything." confirm his lack of faith. When he tried everything possible to help his son and did not succeed, he turned to Christ and His disciples as his last resort.

That mute and deaf spirit possessing this child is actually the spirit of the world. That spirit doesn't enter into everybody, but possesses only those who give in and surrender to this temporary world. These are people who neglect virtuous life according to the Gospel and refuse to fight for eternal life. Instead of living a spiritual life, man gives in to this earthly life according to his bodily desires, and slowly over time distances himself from the only source of true life – God. So frequently, parents teach their own children that the meaning of this earthly life is all about enjoying and experiencing this world. For an agnostic or an atheist, the heavenly kingdom, eternal life, as well as practicing Christian virtues are not something worth mentioning, because these limit our "experience" of this world. Worse still, some doubt the very existence of a heavenly kingdom. That is exactly what happened to the father from this Gospel: his son inherits his father's lack of faith in God and he, therefore developed the utmost confidence in this world. That's why the spirit of the world enters into this child.

When a man accepts a concept of life without God, he unconsciously and unintentionally invites the spirit of this world to enter into him. That does not happen instantly, but insensibly and gradually, because man slowly suffocates his God-like soul and separates himself or herself from God. At first, the spirit of the world will stay hidden, insidiously planting various thoughts into our mind. Once the spirit of this world imposes its will on us, we will be pushed far away from God, so we cannot by our own free will return to virtuous life. Then, it is finally free to torment us with a variety of spiritual and bodily sicknesses. Apostle Paul clearly speaks about that state of mind, when we know what we do is wrong, and don't want to do it, but we cannot stop ourselves from doing it: "For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do." "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice." (Romans 7:15; 19). That is the clear sign we are under the influence of the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world is also called "the mute and deaf spirit", because it makes the possessed person mute and deaf to any spiritual matter. Parents experience this when their children stray away and deviate from a course without any destination and purpose. Our children are being smashed to the ground, thrown into the fire to be burnt, thrown into the water to be drowned by the spirit of the world through: drugs, alcohol, gambling, smoking and all other things distorting the image and likeness of God in them. When we try talking sense to them, nothing spiritual comes out of their mouth, nor enters into their ears.

Without the Spirit of God, a person is not able to know the things of God. (1 Corinthians 2:11). "Now we have received, not **the spirit of the world**, but the Spirit who is from God."

(1Corinthians 2:12). On chrismation we receive the Holy Spirit, who can lead us to achieving “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:15). That can be achieved through a virtuous and Christ-like life within the Church, following Christ as the example in everything. That is how we learn the ability to discern the difference between good and evil, and to choose to practice what is good. The main goal of Christian life is to “come to the unity of the faith and to the knowledge of the Son of God. We are to aim towards the fullness and stature of Christ.

This Gospel should be a warning that even a baptized and chrismated person can be possessed by the spirit of the world, if they disregard their vocation to follow Christ in this life. Most people arrange baptism of their children, but instead of teaching them to live life according to Christ, they teach them to accept the wisdom of this world that is always attractive and reasonable for someone without faith. On the surface, earthly wisdom appears to be true, but without God earthly and material preoccupations will lead us away into spiritual despair, abandonment and ultimately into spiritual death. To prevent this from happening to us, the first thing we need is faith.

**“ Jesus said to him: “ If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”** Jesus doesn’t expel the unclean spirit straight away. Firstly, He helps the father by completing his faith and making it strong enough. With the tears of repentance the father repents for his unbelief. We can see here that without God’s help, a man cannot reach full potential of his faith, because faith is something we cannot gain by our mind and knowledge. Faith is more like a relationship between a child and a father, and is gradually gained by virtuous life in communion with the Son of God.

**When Jesus saw that people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!” Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” So He said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”** The words of Christ: “come out of him and enter him no more” mean that the unclean spirit can return if we separate ourselves again from God. We should especially pay attention that Christ underscored the words “nothing but prayer and fasting”. To fight unclean spirits we need faith, prayer and fasting. Lent cleanses our body from bodily desires, and teaches us that we don’t depend on this material world and earthly food but only on God. Prayer elevates our inner being above this world, and cleanses our soul, heart and mind from uncleanness caused by earthly passions like: pride, greed, debauchery, envy, gluttony, anger, despair and many others.

During Great lent we ask God to protect and cleanse us from the spirit of the world. We do that by the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian: **O Lord and Master of my life! Take from me the spirit of laziness, despair, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Your servant. O Lord and King! Grant me to see my own errors and not to judge my brother; For blessed are You unto the ages of ages. Amen.**

The message of this Gospel is to believe, pray and fast in order to prevent falling under the influence of the spirit of the world. As parents we should gradually introduce our children to our Orthodox faith, teaching them from our own example to practice prayer and fasting as well as all other Christian values. Not even for a moment should we presume that our children are safe in this “world that lies under the sway of the wicked one.” ( 1 John 5:19). A wise man will accept God’s important words as a vital necessity, not simply as a custom that should be practiced from time to time, or only when we have some spiritual and physical problems.