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GREAT LENT: Meeting the Lord in our “Deep Heart”

by Fr. John

During the month of February we have been considering the experience of “meeting the Lord.” We observed how Simeon and Anna, over the course of their long lives and within the daily routine of prayer and fasting, were prepared by the Holy Spirit for the coming of Jesus as an infant: A consistently followed routine can save. But, something within the economically successful yet unsatisfying routine in the life of Zacchaeus led him to seek just the sight of Christ’s presence, and that encounter and the reaction of receiving Jesus joyfully, changed everything about him: Sometimes we need to move past and beyond actions that have become just a routine or habit. The publican/tax collector and Pharisee discovered the profound irony manifested in the expression of the monk Elias that “sin is powerless when there is penitence, and love [i.e. the doing of the right things as exemplified by the Pharisee] has no value when there is pride.” There is nothing, when redeemed by a change of mind and action, that can prevent us from meeting the Lord, yet, all the right things, done selfishly or in judgment of others, will bring us no closer to Him. The Prodigal Son – once he “came to his senses” – began to understand the “relational permanence” provided to him within his father’s love (that had always been there). His older brother, never “coming to his senses,” could only feel resentment and anger toward both his father and brother –yet the same permanent experience of his father’s love was “always” offered and available to him as well. The last of the Pre-Lenten Gospel lessons (on the themes of the Last Judgment and Forgiveness) remind us that the experience of meeting the Lord will come within the relations and forgiveness of others: “When you have done it to the least of these you have done it to me” (Mt 25:40).

The examples of these Gospel stories, while introducing us again to particular characters, remind us that the essential effort to meet the Lord, to unite ourselves with Him, can and will come when we have prepared ourselves. It takes place when we have cooperated with the Holy Spirit both by maintaining the routines of prayer and fasting and ending routines that are self-destructive.

Fr. Zacharias, a monk of the Orthodox Monastery of St. John the Baptist, in England spoke recently at St. Vladimir’s Seminary on “Domestic Theology.” He said, “There is not a greater miracle in the whole universe than the union of man’s heart with the Spirit of God...Everyone has been created in a special manner with a ‘deep heart.’ This deep heart of man requires a divine sensation, that is the destiny of man – and that’s why God targets the deep heart of man. Everybody has a deep heart, and we have to make it come to the surface...Every person created in the image and likeness of God has this potential when he receives the

Word of God and invokes the Name of God – then the purpose of his coming to this life begins to be realized.”

The spiritual lessons we have acquired over the month of February have prepared us to enter into the journey of Great Lent, the journey towards the experience of understanding more profoundly — within the deep places of our heart— the death and resurrection of Jesus. “Deep calls to deep,” the expression from Psalm 42:7 reminds us that God is always calling, always targeting, always exploring how to reach that place which is most receptive within us. Let us enter into this journey with humility, with joy, and with the expectation that this encounter, this meeting with the Lord is not only possible, not only our destiny, but that which we most desire.