



SUNDAY OF SAINT JOHN CLIMACUS

April 3

THE GOSPEL READING

Mark 9:17-31

[O Faithless Generation]

At that time, a man came to Jesus kneeling and saying: "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit; and wherever it seizes him it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting." They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed,



GREEK ORTHODOX
ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

after three days he will rise."

THE SERMON

After revealing His divinity to His disciples on Mount Tabor, Jesus Christ prophesizes His impending suffering, death, and resurrection. In this way, He not only prepares His disciples for the most significant trial to come, but He also teaches them about faith and hope. After the Transfiguration, as they come down from the mountain and continue their travels around the region of Galilee, a desperate father seeks out the Lord in order to help his son. The boy had been possessed by an evil spirit which caused seizures and prevented him from speaking. Besides the tremendous suffering the boy and his family endured, his life is also in danger.

At the time of his greatest need, the father has some measure of hope, and that is why he brings his son to Christ's disciples. The father is desperate for help because he loves his son, and he had heard that Jesus was known for healing those who came to Him. Therefore he brings the boy to the disciples when the Lord is away.

However, the disciples were not able to help, and when Jesus returns, He rebukes them. "O faithless generation," the Lord says, "how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." They bring the boy to Him, and when the evil spirit comes face to face with the Lord, it immediately enrages and agitates the boy. The father tells the Lord that this had been happening since the boy's childhood, pleading that "if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

The Lord teaches us that all things are possible for those who have faith in Him. Faith is the key to our spiritual life. Faith needs to be nurtured, so that it develops and grows. On the other hand, the absence of faith can be a stumbling block in our lives. Faith connects us to the Lord, and it becomes the channel through which our lives can be transformed. It is by faith that we draw near to the Lord and open up ourselves to His will. By faith, we "entrust ourselves and one another, and our whole lives to Christ our God," as we petition in the Divine Liturgy.

It is by faith that the Grace of God enters our lives and permeates our whole being, enabling us to turn away from sin and towards God, even when we face challenging trials and powerful temptations. As Saint Paul writes, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The disciples could not help the boy because they still lacked sufficient faith. Also, when the father brought his son to the Lord, his own faith falters, and he is unsure that Jesus could help. The Lord answers him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" The

Lord satisfies the father's request because of His great love and mercy. The man's prayer – *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"* – can become *our* prayer as our own confidence and faith in Christ continue to grow every day, with His help and guidance. The Lord says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). The father in the Gospel lesson seeks to increase his faith for his son to be healed, and the Lord responds with love and compassion. The son who could not speak and appeared lifeless is healed by the Son of God, who would Himself rise from the dead forever changing the course of humankind.

Sickness in Scripture is often connected to demonic possession because many types of illness were not completely understood at that time. As human beings, we are comprised of both body and soul. The spiritual and physical worlds are united within us in ways that transcend our complete understanding. Ultimately, our goal is to draw near to God as complete human beings. In body and soul. In faith and love. So that we can be healed of our spiritual infirmities. So that we can be transfigured by the Grace of the Lord. This begins with repentance and humility. Metaphorically, it is a journey to scale the mountain of faith and climb the ladder of spiritual ascent.

The father in the Gospel lesson shows humility by kneeling, but he still lacks faith. The disciples also lacked faith, but Christ rebukes the man for reproaching the disciples since the boy's healing was prevented by his own lack of faith. In effect, Jesus publicly defends His disciples only to rebuke them privately at a later time. We are similarly encouraged to graciously correct others first in private and avoid publicly embarrassing them (Matthew 18:15-17). In this regard, Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalivia generally instructs us to "exercise ourselves in patience and endurance," and to approach all situations "with love, kindness, meekness, patience and humility." When the disciples ask the Lord why they could not cast out the spirit from the boy, Jesus answers, "this kind can only be driven out by prayer and fasting." The banishment of spiritual enemies requires an inclusive approach based on faith, prayer, and fasting. Our faith can be nurtured in many ways, including through prayer and fasting. In this light, we come to understand the spiritual purpose of fasting. As Saint Nektarios of Aegina explains, "fasting is recommended as a means of preparing the mind and the heart for divine worship, for long prayer, for rising from the earthly, and for spiritualization."

During this time of Great Lent, let us increase our efforts in the spiritual disciplines. Let us grow in faith. Let us place our hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us trust in Him always. For the Lord is with us, and if we open ourselves to His love and mercy, we know that He will answer, for He loves us, and longs for our salvation.