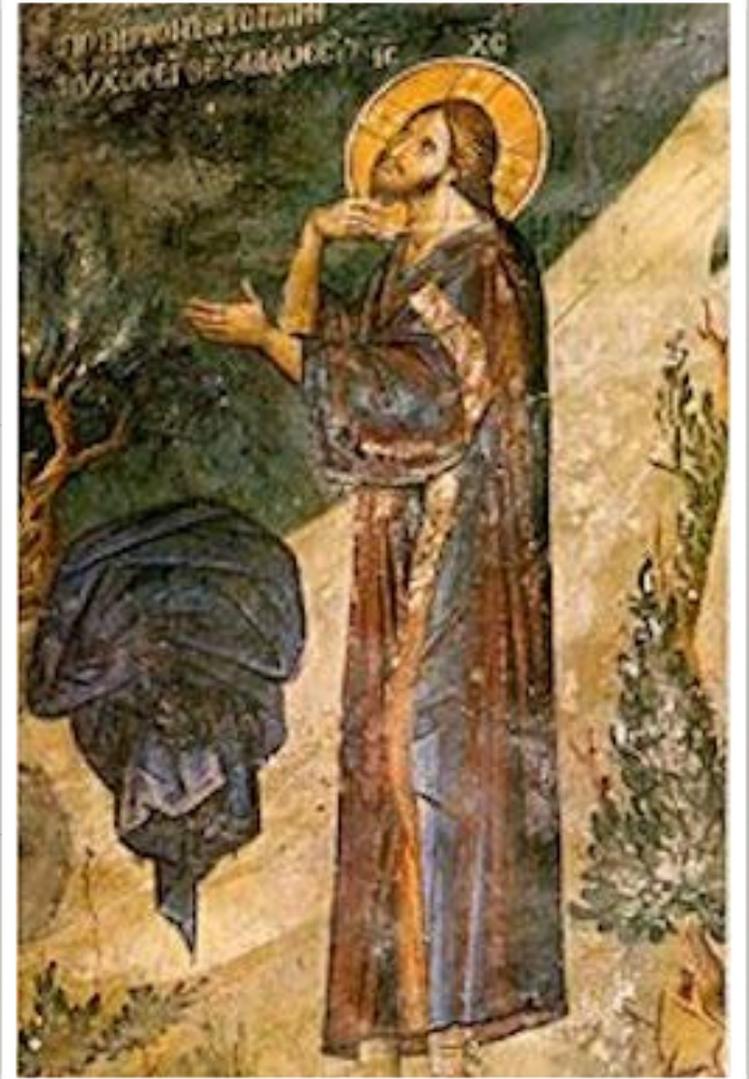

The True Meaning of Fasting



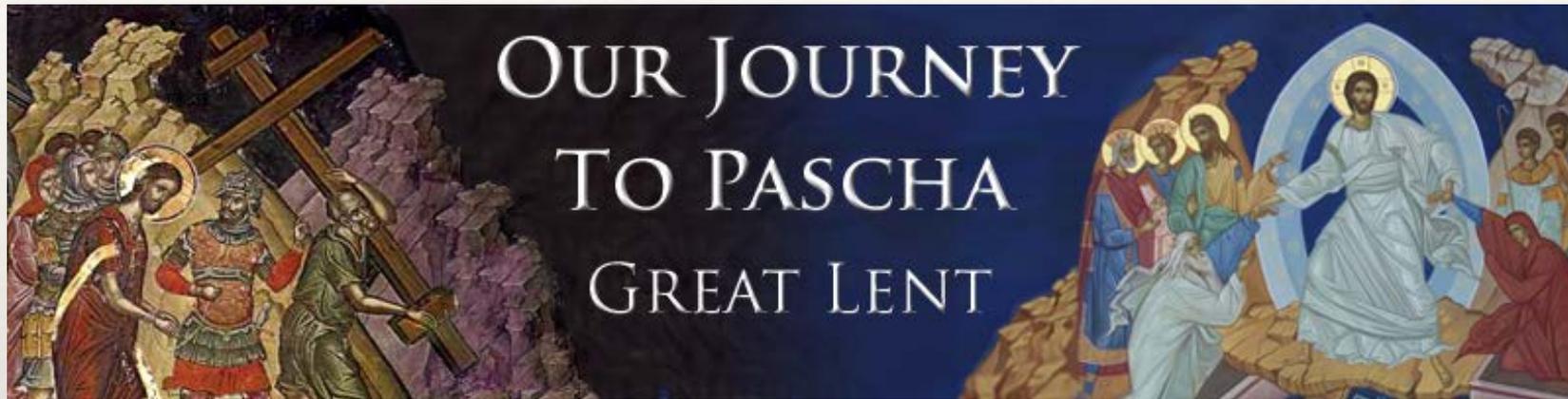
What is the true meaning of fasting?



- ❖ today, commonly thought to be merely about external rules relating to what we can and cannot eat
- ❖ associated with Great and Holy Lent
- ❖ νηστεία = νη + ἐσθίω

Is this really what fasting is all about?

What is the true meaning of Fasting



- ❖ If Great Lent is a preparatory time of the year meant to assist us in encountering the risen Lord, how can abstinence of certain foods help us in this?
- ❖ there is, unfortunately, a tendency to overemphasise external rules, in a legalistic way (*nor should fasting be seen as outdated and unnecessary*)

Some preliminary remarks:

Indispensability of Fasting

- ❖ “And *when* you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt 6:16-18)



Some preliminary remarks:

Why do we fast?

- ❖ Do we fast thinking that God is somehow pleased that his followers do not eat?
- ❖ Do we fast thinking that God is somehow pleased to see his followers, suffer?
- ❖ Do we fast thinking that this, in some way, will serve as a way of compensating and repaying God for our sins?

The purpose of fasting is:

- a helpful 'tool' in order to renew our relationship with God, our neighbour and the world at large
- "... to gain mastery over oneself and to conquer the passions of the flesh... to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world, in order to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom of God... 'an indispensable means' of gaining the fruit of the Holy Spirit" (T. Hopko, *Spirituality*, 133-4)

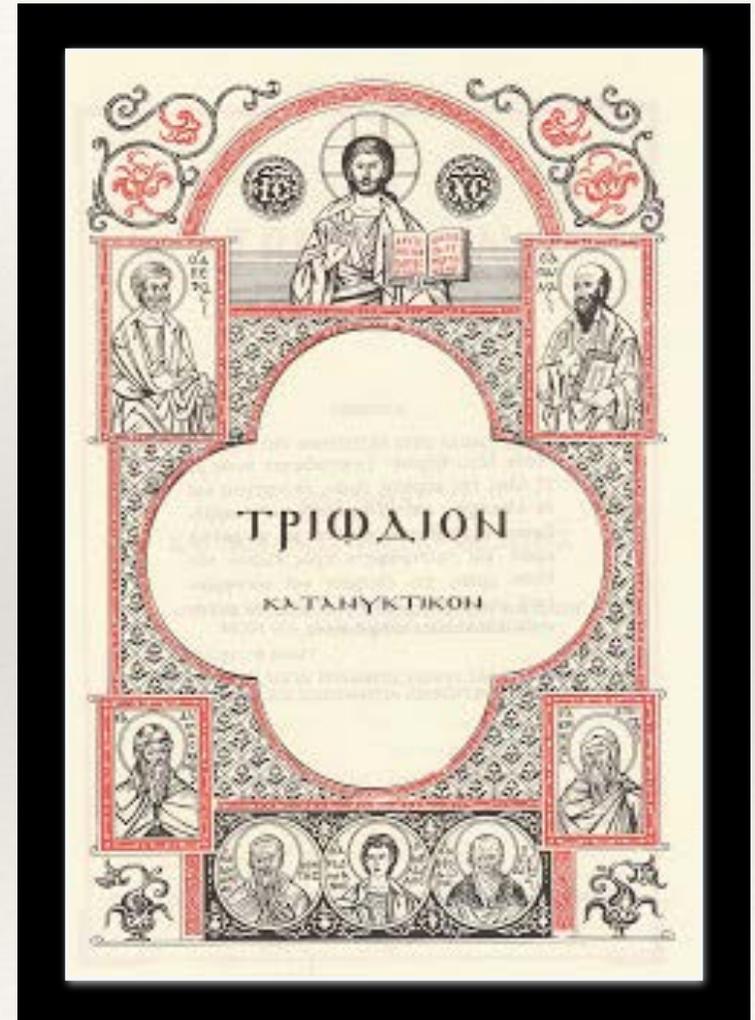
Some Preliminary Remarks:

Historical Development of the Fast

- ❖ **today's fast - the result of a long historical development**
- ❖ **2nd - 3rd cent.** - Fast of Holy Week
 - ❖ one of two days and specifically a Paschal fast in preparation of the the feast.
 - ❖ Only bread, salt and water allowed
 - ❖ cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book V, ch. 25, sect. 12:
“For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night.”
- ❖ **4th cent. onwards** - 40 days Fast
 - ❖ first explicit reference, *First Ecumenical Council*, 325AD
 - ❖ preparatory fast for the baptism of catechumens
- ❖ **Lenten Fast - the convergence of these two distinct practices**
- ❖ **7th - 8th cent.** - *Triodion* fast

Vision of fasting as gleaned from our liturgical tradition

- ❖ **Why such an approach?**
 - ❖ our hymns reveal, in sung form, the theological outlook of the Orthodox Church
- ❖ *Aposticha Idiomela*
 - ❖ intentionally added in the Services to remind the faithful about the true meaning of fasting



Fasting

- ❖ more than rules about what we can and cannot eat, rather fasting is really about renewing our relationship with God, our neighbour and the world more broadly
 - ❖ importance of keeping the external and internal aspects of fasting together



Fasting

connected with the dynamic of *katharsis*

Pure Monday

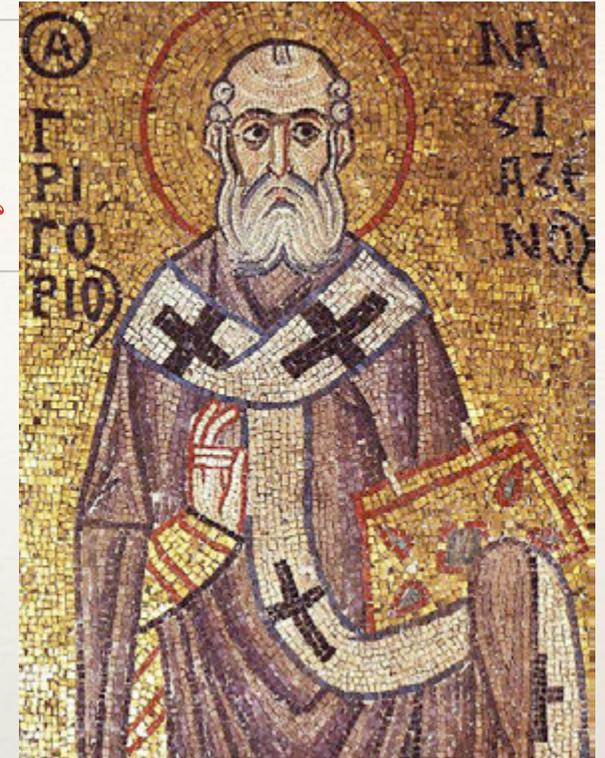
- ❖ *Apostichon Idiomelon*
- ❖ Νηστεύσωμεν νηστείαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ Κυρίῳ. Ἀληθὴς νηστεία, ἢ τῶν κακῶν ἀλλοτροίωσις, ἐγκράτεια γλώσσης, θυμοῦ ἀποχή, ἐπιθυμιῶν χωρισμός, καταλαλιᾶς, ψεύδους, καὶ ἐπιορκίας. Ἡ τούτων ἔνδεια, νηστεία ἐστίν, ἀληθὴς καὶ εὐπρόσδεκτος
- ❖ “Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord, *True fasting* is deliverance from evil, temperance of the tongue, refrain from anger, separation from lusts, and from slanders, from falsehood and from perjury. The absence of all these makes our fasting true and acceptable”

Fasting

connected with the dynamic of *katharsis*

Pure Monday

- ❖ renewing our relationship with God involves, as a first step, our effort towards purity
- ❖ “blessed are the pure, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8)
- ❖ many fathers speak of the importance of purity as a first step towards encountering God
 - ❖ “Discussion of theology is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone - it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. Nor, I would add, is it for every occasion, or every audience; neither are all its aspects open to inquiry... It is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and more importantly, have undergone or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul [καὶ πρὸ τούτων καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα κεκαθαρομένων, ἢ καθαιρομένων, τὸ μετριώτατον]. For one who is not pure, to lay hold of pure things is not safe [οὐδὲ ἀσφαλές], just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.”



Fasting

connected with the dynamic of *katharsis*

Pure Monday



- ❖ *Apostichon Idiomelon*
- ❖ we must be careful not to impoverish the meaning of purification
- ❖ note the etymological proximity between κάθαρσις (purity) and κατ - ἄρτιος (integrity)
- ❖ Purity = an internal consistency or integrity of character which, in the face of temptation, remains totally devoted to God.
- ❖ Purity = a dynamic which involves a gradual transformation from brokenness to wholeness

Fasting with the eager anticipation and joy

- ❖ fasting ought **not** be practised with a sense of glumness and dolefulness
- ❖ purpose of fasting is to open us up to the splendour of the *new life* that comes from the Cross
- ❖ the experience of physical hunger ought to be transformed for hunger and thirst to encounter the crucified and risen Lord



Fasting with the eager anticipation and joy

First Week Tuesday *Apostichon Idiomelon*

- ❖ Νηστείαν, οὐκ ἀποχήν βρωμάτων μόνον τελέσωμεν, ἀλλά παντός ὑλικοῦ πάθους ἀλοτροίωσις... ἵνα... ἄξιοι γενώμεθα τῆς τοῦ Ἀμνοῦ μεταλήψεως, τοῦ ὑπέρ τοῦ κόσμου σφαγέντος ἑκουσίως Υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ, καί πνευματικῶς ἑορτάσωμεν, τήν ἐκ νεκρῶν τοῦ Σωτῆρος Ἀνάστασιν, εἰς ὕψος ἀρθέντες, ἀρετῶν ἐν φαιδρότητι, καί τῇ τρυφῇ τῶν ἀρίστων ἔργων, εὐδραίνοντες τόν Φιλάνθρωπον
- ❖ Let us keep the fast not only by abstinence of food, but also by estrangement from every bodily passion... so that we may be counted worthy to partake of the Lamb, the Son of God who on his own will has been slaughtered for the sake of the world; and to celebrate spiritually the Saviour's resurrection. Thus we shall be lifted up on high, in the joyousness of virtue, and by the delight of excellent works we shall gladden God, the Lover of Humankind.

Fasting with the eager anticipation and joy

First Week Tuesday *Apostichon Idiomelon*

- ❖ once again we see that fasting is not merely concerned with regulations about food
- ❖ the purpose of fasting is to prepare to partake of the Lamb of God in Holy Communion, for *God's kingdom*
- ❖ **Tuesday of the Second Week**



“Let us fast from food... and from passions that cause our destruction, so that we may harvest life coming from the Cross of God, and with the grateful thief *return to our former home*, receiving from Christ our God the great mercy”

Fasting and almsgiving

First Vespers of Pre-Sanctified Liturgy

- ❖ Νηστεύοντες ἀδελφοί σωματικῶς, νηστεύσωμεν καί πνευματικῶς· λύσωμεν πάντα σύνδεσμον ἀδικίας· διαρρήξωμεν στραγγαλιάς βιαίων συναλλαγμάτων· πᾶσαν δυγγραφήν ἄδικον διασπασωμεν· δώσωμεν πεινῶσιν ἄρτον, καί πτωχοὺς ἀσέγους εἰσαγάγωμεν εἰς οἴκους, ἵνα λάβωμεν παρὰ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ, τό μέγα ἔλεος
- ❖ While fasting with the body, o sisters and brothers, let us also fast in spirit; let us loosen every connection with injustice, let us break the ties of contracts made by violence; let us break all unjust agreements. Let us give bread to the hungry, and introduce into our house the poor who have no roof to cover them, that we may receive from Christ our God the great mercy.

Fasting and almsgiving

Thursday of the Second Week

- ❖ Μετανοίας ὁ καιρός, καί ζωῆς αἰωνίου πρόξενος ἡμῖν, ὁ τῆς Νηστείας ἀγών, ἐάν ἐκτείνωμεν χεῖρας εἰς εὐποιῖαν· οὐδέν γάρ οὕτω σώζει ψυχὴν, ὡς ἡ μετάδοσις τῶν ἐπιδεομένων· ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη συγκεκριαμένη τῇ νηστείᾳ, ἐκ θανάτου ρύεται τὸν ἄνθρωπον. Αὐτὴν ἀσπασώμεθα, ἧς οὐδεν ἴσον· ἰκανὴ γάρ ὑπάρχει σῶσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν
- ❖ It is the time of repentance: the struggle of the fast will be for us the cause of living eternally, if we stretch out our hands in works of mercy; for nothing can save our soul so much as generosity towards the needy. Almsgiving mingled with fasting redeems us from death. Let us adopt and exercise it, as this is the best way for the salvation of our souls.

Fasting and almsgiving

First Vespers of Pre-Sanctified Liturgy

- ❖ fasting ought to be accompanied by practical works of compassion
- ❖ inextricable link between fasting and *philoxenia*
- ❖ even the experience of physical hunger as a reminder of all those who are without food
- ❖ fasting an aid to help us remember an often forgotten truth that “the other is my nearest God”

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you visited me. For truly I say to you, if you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me” (Mt 25)



Fasting and almsgiving

❖ Isaiah 58:3-8 First Vespers of Pre-Sanctified Liturgy

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is. 58:6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.



Cf: the Parable of the Last Judgement

fasting needs to be accompanied by
almsgiving, giving our time and simply
being their for the other

Fasting and almsgiving

Cf. *Ainoi*, Last Judgement Sunday

- ❖ ... Consider well, my soul: do you fast? Then despise not your neighbour. Do you abstain from food? Condemn not your brother, lest you be sent away into the fire, there to burn as wax



Fasting without judging others

- ❖ **St Basil the Great**
“But don’t limit the goodness of fasting by abstaining only from foods... Don’t “fast unto judgment and strife.” You don’t eat meat, but you eat your brother. You abstain from wine, but stubbornly hold on to insolence. You patiently wait until evening to partake, but you spend the day in court.” *On Fasting* 1, 10. (PG 31.181B)
- ❖ *Better to eat meat in the fast and be kind to others, than not to eat and be judgmental of others. When you begin to deride others who do not fast, then the purpose of fasting has been destroyed*

Why such emphasis on almsgiving?

- ❖ without our struggle to fix our eyes *not* on ourself, but on the 'other' we will not be able to encounter God,
- ❖ therefore without concern for the other, fasting from food has no value
- ❖ **1Jn 1:9-10:**
“Whoever says, “I am in the light,” while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.”



From the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

- ❖ One day, St Epiphanius sent someone to Abba Hilarion with this request: “Come and let us see one another before we depart from the body.” When he came, they rejoiced in each other’s company. During their meal, they were brought a fowl; Epiphanius took it and gave it to Hilarion. Then the old man said to him: “Forgive me, but since I received the habit, I have not eaten meat that has been killed.” Then the bishop answered: “Since I took the habit, I have not allowed anyone to go to sleep with a complaint against me and I have not gone to rest with a complaint against anyone.” The old man replied: “Forgive me, your way of life is better than mine.”

Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 57.



ΗΑΝΑΨΑΣΙΟ

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