

Second Saturday of Great Lent, 2020

Prayer for Our Encounter with Others

Mk 1:35-44

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Gospel text that we are given on this, the Second Sunday of Great Lent, we are told that our Lord goes out to pray early in the morning. We are told in St. Luke's Gospel that he does this often; it is his custom to arise early in the morning to pray (Lk 4:42; 5:18; cf. Mt 14:23). The disciples are not surprised, then, that our Lord is out praying, and that if they want Him they need to go find Him. And so they do--they go out to look for him--in a secluded place somewhere--because crowds of people were already, early in the morning, looking for Him.

Our Lord replies to the disciples' concern for these seekers not by saying that He will come to them, but rather that he is going to leave that town, and the people in it, and go to the next town. Then He adds a very important comment: this is why I came out to pray. That is, He came out to pray to prepare himself for the preaching to the new communities that he was going to travel to that day; he was preparing Himself for the people he would meet that day, and preparing them for their meeting with Him.

This action by our Lord reminds me of an account I read of the newly glorified saint, Sophrony of Essex. We are told by his disciples that when pilgrims would come to the Monastery to meet with him, his disciples would go to his cell--a separate house, I believe--to bring him to the pilgrims. And his disciples would look forward to making the walk with the staretz in hopes of being able to have a little conversation with him while they were on their way--but he would have nothing of it. Instead, he would insist on quiet as they walked so that he could pray for his impending meeting with the pilgrims, praying for them and readying his own soul.

So, very much like our Lord, St. Sophrony carried within himself a tremendous concern, an expectant anticipation, for the people he was going to meet in the coming day, in the coming moments. Each person was to be experienced as a participant in a divinely orchestrated encounter, in need of heavenly grace to reveal and protect the preciousness of shared life. A profound sense of the treasure of our relationships with one another. A profound sense of the spiritual foundation for our relationships with one another.

Our relationships are not ultimately about having a good time together, telling a good joke, or finding out some news from each other. Sure, these are fine and good things to do, even important, e.g., to care about another's physical and mental well-being, especially in these uncertain times of the pandemic. But these concerns are not what we are *ultimately* about as human beings. Our Lord wanted to have a *spiritual* encounter with the people to whom He would be preaching. St. Sophrony wanted to have a *spiritual* encounter with the people he was going to confess or guide. They wanted to prepare themselves, to be in the right frame of mind for facing the unexpected, the fragile and vulnerable, the violent and belligerent. And they wanted those whom they would meet to be prepared as well, to have open ears and softened hearts.

So it would be good for us, as much as we are able, to follow this example, to think the same way, to have the same mindset, to engage in the same practice, as our Lord and the saints. Imagine, if we prepared ourselves for our interactions with people, known and unknown, whom we would meet in the coming day. What a transformation might take place in our hearts and minds if we began our day in prayer for the encounters we would be having that day, or if we offered a simple little prayer as we saw someone approaching that we weren't expecting to 'run into'. Maybe as we are riding in the car to meet someone, to go to the doctor, to come to Church--a simple little prayer: "Prepare our hearts, O Lord; calm our thoughts and quiet our tongue, and heighten our attentiveness." In this way, we gradually realize that these prayers prepare our hearts, and the hearts of those we meet, and that the true foundation of our encounter, our relationship, is spirit to spirit, heart to heart. That they are founded on Christ who is the cornerstone. The bounds that truly unite us are not of this world, but are gifts of the Holy Spirit; indeed, the uniting Bond is the Holy Spirit Himself.

So, from our Lord's example, and the example of the many great saints, let us strive, in the simplest ways, to always offer our relationships to God beseeching Him to heal them, to enlighten them, to protect them, to flourish them.

Through the prayers of St. Sophrony and all the saints, may God give us the strength to so act.

Appendix--Texts

Mk 1:35-44

Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with Him searched for Him. ³⁷ When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." ³⁸ But He said to them, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth." ³⁹ And He was preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and casting out demons.

⁴⁰ Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." ⁴¹ Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." ⁴² As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. ⁴³ And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Lk 4:42-43

Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; ⁴³ but He said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent."

Lk 5:15-16

However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. ¹⁶ So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.