

MEAT-FARE SUNDAY
26 February / 10 March 2024
The Last Judgment

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Amen!

Во имя Отца и Сына и Святого Духа! Аминь!

Today is Meat-Fare Sunday. What does this mean? Fr Alexander Schmemmann (*Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*) writes that fasting...is prescribed by the Church” as part of our preparation” for what he describes as “the great effort” which will lead us to Pascha. We have probably heard some people ask “What are you giving up for Lent?” This is the wrong question as it is negative, not positive. In some of his Epistles, St Paul refers to the training of athletes. Meat Fare Sunday is an invitation for us to prepare ourselves like athletes for the journey ahead of us, a journey of love. Of love, Fr Schmemmann writes that it is love which is “the foundation, the very life of the Church which is, in the words of St Ignatius of Antioch, the “unity of faith and love.” Fr Schmemmann writes that “it is *love*...that constitutes the theme of ‘*Meat-Fare Sunday*’...” The whole tone of Meat-Fare Sunday and the days after it is positive! The entire emphasis of Pre-Lent and great Lent is on expanding the qualities of faith and witness! We are asked to do more, not less! Concerning today’s Gospel reading, the parable of the Last Judgment, Fr Schmemmann writes that “The parable of the Last Judgment is about Christian love. Not all of us”, he writes, “are called to work for ‘humanity’, yet each one of us has received the grace of Christ’s love. We know”, he continues, “that all men ultimately need this *personal love* – the recognition in them of their unique soul in which the beauty of the whole creation is reflected in a unique way. We also know that men are in prison and are sick and thirsty and hungry because that personal love has been denied them. And, finally, we know that however narrow and limited the framework of our personal existence, each one of us has been made responsible for a tiny part of the Kingdom of God, made responsible by that very gift of Christ’s love. Thus, on whether or not we have accepted this responsibility, on whether we have loved or refused to love, shall we be judged”. And here, Fr Schmemman quotes these words of Christ our Lord: For “in as much as you have done it unto the least of these, My brethren, you have done it unto me...”

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46: This morning’s reading from the *Gospel of St Matthew* is the climax to a series of the parables of Jesus. The Last Judgment is its theme, and this parable begins with these words: “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory”. What will happen next is that “All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.” *The Orthodox Study Bible* reminds us that “Christ uses sheep to illustrate the righteous for they follow His voice and are gentle and productive.” The goats, on the other hand, represent the “unrighteous”. Traditionally they are regarded as unruly and difficult. The King, the Son of Man has the sheep placed to His right; the goats

to His left. The parable continues: “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” What have they done that brings honour and blessing to them? The King says to them “for 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 you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” Those to whom the King speaks are puzzled! The parable continues: “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ The King answers, saying ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ Here, echoing in our souls are the words of the Two Great Commandments: LOVE GOD! LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR! Who is my neighbour? The parable has already answered: Our neighbours include the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner! All those who have been ignored, abandoned, forgotten, mistreated are among those who needed to be loved, cared for, accepted, comforted, loved! It is love which is needed so much in this world, but sadly love, the love of Christ is sometimes – perhaps too often – forgotten or ignored! Now we come to the climax of the parable as the King turns to those to his left hand and rebukes them, saying ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Astonished by this rebuke, those hearing these strong words reply ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ And the Lord answers them saying ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ The parable ends with the terrifying words that “these”, the ones with empty souls, greedy souls, selfish souls, indifferent and uncaring souls “will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” What was missing from those who condemned themselves was LOVE! And now, once again we turn to the wise words of Fr Alexander Schmemmann. “Christ left with His disciples ... a new commandment, ‘that they love one another’ adding “By this shall all know that they are my disciples, if you love one another.” Fr Schmemmann reminds us that “Love is thus the foundation, the very life of the Church...” Dear brothers and sisters, it is love that brings us here today! It is love that unites us as together we continue our pilgrimage through Pre-Lent to Great Lent and through Great Lent to Pascha and the glory of the Resurrection of Christ our Lord, to the glory, to the triumph of love over hate and death! Glory to God!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Amen!

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Epistle: 1 Cor. 8:8-9:2

8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. 9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. 1 Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2 If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.