
4th Sunday of Lent 2020

Hebrews 6:13-20 & Mark 9:17-31

Today, the fourth Sunday of Great Lent is devoted to memory of Saint John Climacus of the Ladder. Klimax (from which the name "John Climacus" was derived) was a great hermit, a monk of Sinai monastery. He lived in the sixth century and at the request of his brother monks, wrote the Ladder of Divine Ascent of Paradise. In it, he described the steps of man climbing to God, and the degrees of religious spiritual perfection that may be attained.

This textbook of practical spirituality begins with these words, "God is life and salvation for all to whom is given free will as a gift". He is saying God has given us a wonderful gift. That gift is "free will." It allows us to make our own choices in life. At each moment of our life we may choose where we are going. The question we should always ask ourselves is this: In choosing our own path are we climbing closer to God or are we going down the ladder away from God?

It takes little effort to go down the ladder. But to climb up the ladder to God takes a lot of work. John of the Ladder tells us a lot and about these efforts, what they are, and how to achieve them. One important factor he says is attitude.

A person's attitude is presented in the second "step" of the ladder, "On Detachment": He tells us what to do if you love God and want to get to heaven when you die, but are concerned about your faults and are mindful of God's punishment on the last judgment? This can make you afraid to die because of all your faults. So, what do you do? You need to rid yourself of attachments, anxiety, or concern for money, for possessions, for family relationships, for worldly glory, for love and brotherhood, or for anything of this earth. Worries about your spiritual condition, even your body, should be pushed aside as hateful. Then when you have stopped thinking about them, caring nothing about them, you will turn freely to Christ. You will look to heaven and to the help coming from there, as in the scriptural sayings: "I will cling close to you" (Ps. 62:9) and "I have not grown tired of following you nor have I longed for the day or the rest that man gives" (Jer. 17:16). It would be a very great disgrace to leave everything after we have been called by God, and then be worried about something that can do you no good in the hour of your need, of your death. The Lord meant this when He told us not to turn back and not to be found useless for the kingdom of heaven. He knew how weak we could be at the start of our religious life, how easily we can turn back to the world when we associate with worldly people or meet them. That's why when someone said to Him, "Let me go away to bury my father," He answered, "Let the dead bury the dead" (Matt. 8:22).

So, we need to be reminded of all those important values that the world makes us forget as we live and have dealings with the secular world. Most of the time the secular world puts first things last and last things first. In doing this it makes the great seem small and the small unimportant things seem great.

Imagine the size of a penny and compare that to the size of the Sun. If you take that penny and hold it close enough to your eye it will block out the sun. That's what the world is doing to us. It fills up our vision with the little things until the big things become small and unimportant and we lose sight of them. And if we live with that long enough, our values soon become twisted and reversed.

Now, think of the difference it would make if, just for a little while we would focus our minds on Christ and everything that He stands for. We need to be reminded of those important things sometimes - things that the world makes us forget. We need that experience to help us keep our sense of direction. One doesn't always change direction in life by working longer and trying harder.

Those of you who have taken courses in orienteering which covers outdoor survival skills, know that when a person is lost in the woods, the worst thing one can do is to keep going. It's been proven that when a person is lost in the woods there is a tendency to walk around in circles when trying to find one's way out of the woods. In this way the person is using up precious hours of day light and energy for nothing. We're told the first thing one should do is climb a hill or a tree. From there it's much easier to see the horizon and get one's bearings. To regain one's sense of direction we require elevation and vision.

We also need that in our personal lives. The pressure of daily living - the assignments, the deadlines we must meet, can sometimes seem like a jungle. And it's easy to get lost in them. We can forget who we are, why we are here, or where we are going. But, if somewhere in our minds we could climb a mountain with Christ, that would help us get back on course. Because, somehow in His presence it's not so hard to tell north from south and east from west.

If we want our lives to be blessed and fruitful during this great Lenten season understand that God's love for us is beyond measure. And like John Climacus, we must build our own ladder of divine ascent to achieve inner peace and to experience that genuine love we so desperately desire. So, let us continue our Lenten journey with renewed zeal.

Amen!