

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2023 FORGIVENESS SUNDAY**

**ROMANS 13: 11-14: 4**

**“DECISION SUNDAY”**

In 1908 Tennessee Senator Edward Carmack ran for governor. The #1 issue of his campaign was prohibition of alcohol. This was about 10 years before nation-wide Prohibition and there were many in Tennessee who wanted Prohibition on a state level---no more booze in the whole state. Carmack pushed this issue hard in his campaign....it was the main point of his campaign speeches.

But campaign assistants and others noticed that backstage, just before his speeches for Prohibition, Carmack was having some quick shots of whiskey! Getting fueled up for his anti-alcohol speech. As word of this leaked out, there came to be a popular statement about Sen. Carmack---  
“Carmack is strictly against alcohol, except when he is thirsty!” (The Border South States, Neal Pierce, W.W. Norton, p. 296)

Sometimes we Orthodox are inconsistent like old Sen. Carmack-----on the topic of Lent which starts tomorrow. We talk about Lent, we have lots of extra services, we encourage participation, we even might have friendly debates with a Protestant friend about why it's important, etc. We are all in for Lent! Except that lots of us hardly really practice it! All for it.....but in really many ignore it for the most part.

It starts tomorrow, which makes today real important. There are already 2 common names for this day. Forgiveness Sunday---because of today's gospel reading (Matthew 6: 14-21) and because of the rite of forgiveness at Forgiveness Vespers this evening. And Cheesefare Sunday---because it's the last day we eat cheese, other dairy, fish, eggs because the full Lenten Fast begins tomorrow. I have a third name to propose---“Decision Sunday”. Today is the day we personally decide what we will do with Lent this year. How will you, how will I, handle the upcoming 7 weeks? If we make good use of it, with God's help, we will grow in Christ. But if we more or less ignore it, these weeks will be of no spiritual value. Today we get to decide.

Lent is a gift from God to us through our Holy Tradition. It is a time to especially strive to grow by God's grace. It is a time period that the Lord

gives us for that purpose, through the traditions handed down to us. In Lent, we are given spiritual tools and disciplines to work with so as to spiritually mature. Many of them are things we can do all year long, but Lent is the time to really focus in.....

But Lent is of no use to us unless each of us, as an individual, makes use of it. There is no magic involved. Just the fact of living through all those pink days on your church calendar won't make a bit of difference. A good Lent requires action----or it's of no value to us.

In today's epistle lesson from Romans 13, St. Paul urges the Roman Christians (and us!) to spiritual action. Not just a passive spiritual life, waiting for God to somehow zap us from above. In chapter 13, verse 12, he writes---"put on the armor of light." And in verse 14, he writes---"put on the Lord Jesus Christ." *Put on* the armor of light, *put on* Jesus Christ. Both phrases urge us to *do* something, to take action. Lent doesn't just happen. We have to work at it as an important way to put on more spiritual light, to put on more of Christ in our lives.

How much will you get out of Lent this year? That depends on how much you put into it. It starts tomorrow, so today is the day to decide....."Decision Sunday". In the bulletin, in the parish newsletter, there is info about the Lenten disciplines. And if you have questions about them, feel free to ask me, or one of the deacons, or someone else you know is knowledgeable about all this. Try to know enough to be able to make intelligent decisions about how you will live during the next 7 weeks.

Some questions for each of us to make decisions about-----

----Which of the many extra services will I attend? How many?

----How strictly will I follow the Lenten Fast?

----Who do I need to forgive during Lent? Is there someone I should ask forgiveness from?

----How can I pray more?

---When will I go to Confession?

---Will I read my Bible more?

---What will I do to help the needy more? Will I give more alms? Maybe I could give that beggar on the corner or on the highway ramp two bucks instead of just one?

Some big decisions to make today! But underneath that whole list is a *really* big decision to make. Whether or not I will get to know Jesus Christ

better in the next 7 weeks? Whether or not I will become personally closer to Him than I am today? That is what Lent is about....as well, of course, as preparing to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord on April 16<sup>th</sup>!

St. Isaac of Syria, about 1500 years ago, wrote these beautiful words----  
“Thirst after Jesus---and He will satisfy you with His love.” If we truly thirst for Jesus, the Lenten disciplines (although difficult) will also be a joy and bring you satisfaction from the love the Lord has for you. And you will come to know your Lord better. But first we have to decide what to do---and today is the day to decide.

The nation of Laos was torn apart by civil war in the 1960's. Two armies fought for years. One was the royal army fighting for the government of the king of Laos. The other was the army of the Pathet Lao, struggling to make Laos a Communist country. There was a jungle town named Nam Bac whose people had a hard time deciding which side they were really on. For quite a while, the town changed sides twice every day!

Once the sun came up in the morning, the royal army would march into town. The royal flag flying, trumpets blowing, the cheering of all the townspeople. They all seemed so wonderfully loyal to their beloved king! And then before sundown every day, the royal army would march out. Then after dark the Pathet Lao would march in. Again, great excitement! The red Communist flag would fly, more trumpets, and all the townspeople again cheering. Now it seemed they were totally loyal to Communism! And before dawn, the Pathet Lao left. And a little later here came again the king's army! Morning and evening this went on every day. The people of Nam Bac just couldn't decide what side they were really on----so they were royalists during the day and Communists at night! (An Eye For the Dragon, Dennis Bloodworth, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1970, p. 261)

Let us not be like the folks in Nam Bac. We need to really decide. And today we need to decide specifically about Lent which starts tomorrow. Will we just slide through Lent and mainly ignore the whole thing? And accomplish nothing. Or will we decide to take it seriously? To make use of this very special season to grow closer to our Lord Jesus Christ and become holier disciples?

Decide today. Act tomorrow.... And for the next 7 weeks. God will help you! God will bless you!