



“Joy of All Who Sorrow”

No 52 March 2013



Praying the Prayer of St Ephraim the Syrian

*O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of idleness, despondency,
ambition or vain talking.*

But rather a spirit of purity, humility, patience and love, bestow on me Thy servant.

*Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother,
for blessed art Thou to the ages of ages. Amen.*

The Prayer of St Ephraim the Syrian is the Lenten Prayer of the Orthodox Church *par excellence*. It is solemnly recited at every Church service on all the days of Great Lent except for Saturdays and Sundays. Moreover, as well as saying the prayer in Church services, faithful Orthodox Christians are also encouraged to add this prayer to their own rule throughout Great Lent so as to enter more fully into the humble and penitent spirit of the Fast.

Although recited by Orthodox for the Season of Lent, it is too easy for this prayer to become just another Lenten observance which we carry out obediently, but only at an external level, without allowing the full import of the words of the prayer to penetrate and sink into our hard hearts. Over the next two issues of the bulletin, therefore, we will take a closer look at St Ephraim’s great prayer and pause over the meaning of each of the words, so as to gain greater spiritual benefit from saying and praying this prayer this Lent.

Let’s begin by looking at the start of the prayer and the first petition –

O Lord and Master of my life

The prayer begins powerfully and pointedly by addressing Christ as “the Lord and Master of my life”. By “life” is not meant my “spiritual life”, but the whole totality of my being. Yet, I can ask myself: *Do I live with the belief that Christ is the Master of my life, rather than myself? Do I give Lordship to other things or people in my life rather than to my Creator and God?*

Give me not a spirit ...

It seems odd that we ask God not to give us bad things as if He were the source of these sins. What is meant is that whilst – without God’s help – we would fall into temptation, we specifically ask God to deliver us from our unnatural and fallen inclination to sin. Given our wilful disregard for God, that we show in so many different ways in our lives, we have no right to ask this mercy of Him. “Spirit”, in Greek “*pneuma*”, means literally “breath”, by which we can understand the basic animating life-forces which fill and fuel our bodies either for the good, the “fruits of the Holy Spirit”, or for evil, the spirits (*passions*) blown into our soul by the evil one.

The Four key sins of the soul

St Ephraim then identifies the 4 key sins, or demonically-blown “spirits”, which keep us from the path of salvation and from the truly vitiating and transformative breath of the Holy Spirit.

1. “The spirit of Idleness” or Sloth is, in the words of Fr Alexander Schmemmann –

that strange laziness and passivity of our entire being which always pushes us “down” rather than “up” - which constantly convinces us that no change is possible and therefore desirable. It is in fact a deeply rooted cynicism which to every spiritual challenge responds “what for?” and makes our life one tremendous spiritual waste. It is the root of all sin because it poisons the spiritual energy at its very source.

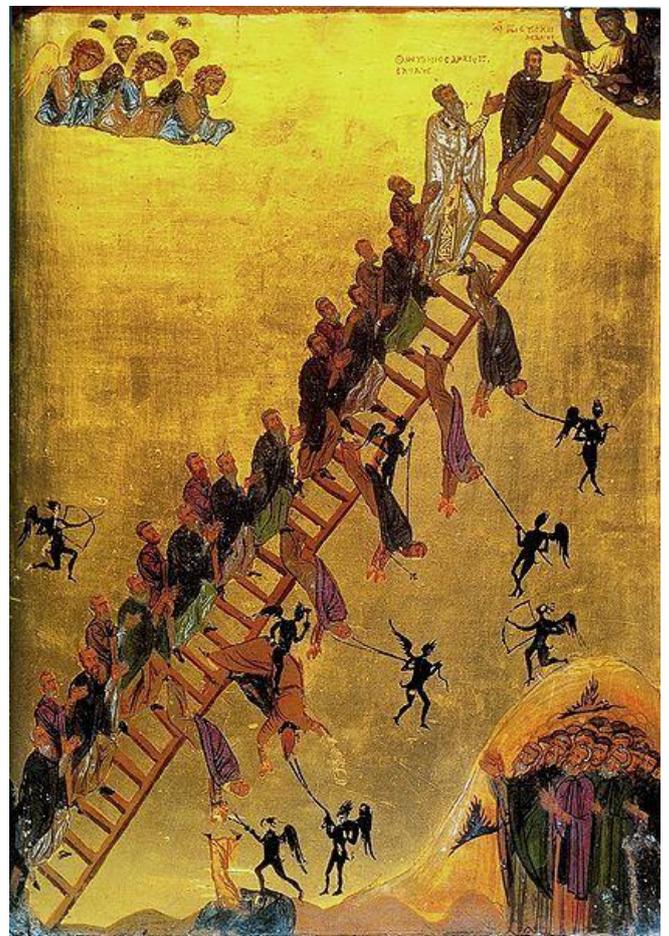
Whilst morally ambivalent in itself, laziness stop me from actively taking up the cross and advancing in the spiritual life. St Seraphim of Sarov was once asked why the miracles and great ascetic feats of the past were not repeated in modern times. He answered, “Only one thing is lacking – a firm resolve”. I can ask then myself: *How often do I excuse myself from taking up the cross of the spiritual life? Do I avoid fasting and confession because it is all too much effort? Do I make time for everything else in my life – watching my favourite television programme, catching up with old friends –*

except God? I say that I am a Christian and want to be saved, and yet I cannot be bothered to make the minimum effort towards my salvation.



2. “The spirit of Despondency” is spiritual despair, the negative response to my realisation of the extent of my own sinfulness and fallenness from God. Rather than urging me to true repentance, the spirit of despondency overwhelms us with the feeling of hopelessness to the extent that we give up on repentance altogether and run in the opposite direction into a bottomless pit of misery, self-pity and despair. Here we can contrast the attitude of Peter, who betrayed the Lord and repented, with that

of Judas, who betrayed the Lord and in his despair committed suicide. The one ran to the Empty tomb and swam naked to the Risen Christ on the shore of Lake Galilee, the other ran away from the open arms of the Lord to the Robber's Field. The state of despondency, of negative self-loathing is the very opposite of the spirit of the Christian which is fundamentally one of joy and hope. I can ask myself: *Do I give in to despondent thoughts like: "what's the use of trying, you are never going to be better than you are?" Do I justify not receiving the Holy Mysteries because I am too sinful? In my despair-filled awareness of the Judgment of God, do I forget His Mercy and ineffable Loving-kindness? Do I really believe that my sinfulness is greater than the Power of God, and that it has not been defeated by the Cross?*



3. "The Spirit of Ambition" is the will to determine my own life and destiny according to my own ideas and desires which usually will involve me putting myself and the realisation of my will – not God's will - above everyone and everything. It is a spirit born of pride, that might not manifest itself in grandiose ways – of wanting to become a powerful public figure – but also in more subtle ways by which I try to subordinate others to my own tastes, opinions and wants. This might be manifest in a lack of consideration, indifference and respect towards other people, particularly those who curb or question my infantile desire to get my own way. As Fr Alexander Men writes, "Everyone has in himself the seeds of the aspiration to crush the will of others, to strangle and subdue it." I can ask myself: *Whilst I might pray for God's will to be done, is this just half-hearted? Do I really want to do the will of God? Why do I find it so hard to get perspective on my own ideas and judgments?*

4. "The Spirit of Vain Talking". As Fr Alexander Schmemmann says, speech is central to our human identity and calling,

Of all created beings, man alone has been endowed with the gift of speech. All Fathers see in it the very "seal" of the Divine Image in man because God Himself is revealed as Word (John, 1:1). But being the supreme gift, it is by the same token the supreme danger. Being the very expression of man, the means of his self-fulfilment, it is for this very reason the means of his fall and self-destruction, of betrayal and sin.

The spirit of vain talking, is idle chatter, gossip. This might seem a small thing for St Ephraim to pick up on - what's the harm, we might ask. Yet, we know ourselves better than this, as such gossip becomes the very voice of sloth, of the cynical despair that so fills our secular media, and of our own puffed-up judgmentalism and hatred of other people. We can thus ask ourselves: *How many times have I said to myself that I am too busy to pray and yet wasted time in pointless chatter? How often have I made cruel or filthy jokes? How often have I half-heartedly intended to have a serious, factual discussion about a situation, which I have allowed to become an opportunity to criticise and gossip about the defects of other people?*



The Life of St Ephraim the Syrian: *Preacher of Repentance*

As St Ephraim himself confessed, his youth was rather difficult:

“I would quarrel over trifles, acted foolishly, gave in to bad impulses and lustful thoughts My youth nearly convinced me that life is ruled by chance. But God's Providence brought my impassioned youth to the light of wisdom.”

After a brush with the law which nearly led to his being severely punished, Ephraim completely reformed, and became a monk.

“Born again in repentance, Ephraim began to train as an athlete of virtues, exorcizing himself in the study of the Holy Scriptures and in prayer and fasting. The passionate and wayward youth was transformed into a humble and contrite monk, weeping day and night for his sins and entirely surrendered to God.”
(Orthodox Life, 1956, No. 4)

He became the disciple of St James, the holy bishop of Nisibis where he lived - which today is known as Nusbyien, a city in South-Eastern Turkey - with whom he attended the first Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325. When the Persians invaded Nisibis, Ephraim moved to Edessa. Despite his humility, he was very talented, and – a humble bath keepers’ assistant to earn his living - he spent his spare time preaching, teaching and writing.

He then spent some time living the eremitic life in a cave, where he devoted himself to prayer, harsh fasting and study of the Holy Scriptures, before returning to Edessa to found a college.

He did not regard himself worthy to be ordained, but St Basil managed to trick him into being made a deacon, by suggesting that they make prostrations before quickly reading the ordination prayers. St Basil had the following to say in praise of the saint: “It is written in the Prophet David: Ephraim is the strength of my head (Ps. 59:9). These prophetic words refer truly to you, for you have led many to the way of virtue and strengthened them in it. And your meekness and dispassion of heart shine for all, like the light”, while his brother St Gregory of Nyssa said the following of his inspired writings: “Who that is proud would not become the humblest of men, reading his discourse on humility? Who would not be influenced with a divine fire, reading his discourse on charity? Who would not wish to be chaste in heart and soul by reading the praise he has lavished on virginity? Who would not be frightened by hearing his discourse on the Last Judgment, which he has depicted so vividly that nothing can be added to it?”

St Ephraim reposed on 28th January 373, after a brief illness.



NOTES AND JOTTINGS ...

OFFERINGS TO THE LORD

We are grateful to those of you who donate items for the church. There is a custom, in Orthodox countries, of donating wine for the altar and oil for the ikon lamps. Communion wine should be red and sweet. The variety often used in churches is *Mavrodaphne* from Greece. It is conveniently stocked by most major supermarkets in this country at around £4 – £5 per bottle. Traditionally, olive oil was used for the ikon lamps but it is expensive. As an alternative we use *Olivio*, a blend of olive oil and vegetable oil that burns well. Also *Mazola*, which is sunflower oil, is good for the lamps.



PROGRESS WITH THE RENOVATIONS

Plans are being made to fill in the disused swimming pool at the back of the house which is both unsightly and a potential hazard. The water was pumped out two years ago, but the pool has since re-filled itself with rain water. Now, the idea is to pump it out once again and fill it with rubble. Then, when the rubble has had time to settle, we can have the area paved to create a courtyard.

PILGRIMAGE TO ST BOTOLPH'S CHURCH IKEN ~ Saturday 29 June, 12pm

We are pleased to announce that we have been invited again by the Rector of St Botolph's Iken, Fr David Murdoch, to serve another Moleben Service in honour of St Botolph on the Eve of his feast, **Saturday 29 June at 12pm**. We will sing the akathist to the saint, "Enlightener of those in darkness", before our new ikon of him, and then pilgrims will have the opportunity to take in the beauty of this ancient holy place, with its Anglo-Saxon cross shaft and stunning views over the River Alde. Afterwards, Loulou Cooke, the church warden of St Botolph's, has kindly invited all the pilgrims to have a picnic lunch in her garden. If you would like to come on the pilgrimage and want to discuss accommodation and transport arrangements then please do get in touch. For more information on the life of St Botolph see [Bulletin No. 43](#).

MEATFARE SATURDAY: Great Panikhida ~ Friday 8 March 7.30pm

On Friday 8 March at 7.30pm we shall serve the Great Panikhida for all the faithful departed. If you have departed relatives, friends who you would like us to remember at this service, please send details of their ecclesiastical rank (if applicable ie. Priest, Deacon etc.) and Christian name.

CHEESEFARE SUNDAY: Maslenitsa Party & Forgiveness Vespers

On Sunday 17 March at approx. 2pm we will have the traditional Cheesefare party (*Maslenitsa*) on the eve of Great Lent, of pancakes with a variety of fillings available in the house. After this we will return to the church at approximately 2pm for Vespers, to ask each other's forgiveness and commence the 40 days in peace with all our brothers and sisters.

FIRST WEEK OF GREAT LENT: Great Compline with Great Canon.

From Monday 18 March to Thursday 21 March of the First Week of Lent (Clean Week), there will be special Lenten services each evening at 7.30pm, comprising of Great Compline with the Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete. See the poster advertising the event on our website.

NAMEDAY

We send congratulation to our hierarch Archbishop Mark and wish him Many Years on the occasion of his nameday, 18 March (St Mark the Faster). **Eis Polla Eti Dhespota!**



Spring on Mount Athos Vasili Nesterenko (1996)

*The springtime of the Fast has dawned,
The flower of repentance has begun to open.
O brethren, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity
And sing to the Giver of Light:
Glory be to Thee, who alone lovest mankind.*

Vespers of Wednesday of Cheesefare week

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