

Seeing God, And Being Seen By Him

Lk 19:1-10; Mt 6:1-18

As Jesus was entering Jericho He gave sight to Bartimaeus, a blind man who was begging along the side of the road. There was a large crowd following Jesus at that time, and when they saw that the blind man was healed they all gave praise to God (Lk 18:35-43; Mk 10:46-52). Surely this created quite a stir in the town, increasing people's curiosity about who this Jesus was. But Zacchaeus was not a mere curiosity seeker. St. Gregory Palamas notes that even as the blind man was longing to be released from the bondage to his physical ailments, so too Zacchaeus was longing to be released from the bondage to his spiritual ailments, from the blindness that greed engenders. He longed to see the one who alone could take away his sins, the one who alone could open his spiritual eyes. St Gregory beautifully describes their encounter:

He who knows the hearts of men also sees the desire in Zacchaeus' heart, looks up, and speaks to him, and calls him by his name, although he had never set eyes on him before, in order charitably *to show His face, to make Himself known* out of kindness, to the man who longed for Him, and to make it clear that Zacchaeus not only loved but was loved.¹

The moment when Jesus looked up to see Zacchaeus looking down at Him was an eternal and mystical moment, beyond the power of words to capture. It is the moment for which every human being yearns; it is the transformative moment in which the Lord acts--not in a generic or abstract way, but concretely and personally toward us. It is where heaven meets earth, where eternity meets time, where love casts out fear and stillness silences inner turbulence: seeing God, and being seen by Him.

Running From The Crowd

Jesus recognized and responded to the desire of Zacchaeus' heart. St Gregory tells us that Zacchaeus did not run from his desire to see Jesus but rather ran from the crowd that was hindering his vision.² We all, created in God's image and immersed in the bountiful gifts of the created world, have within us that same longing to see Jesus. The Kingdom of God truly is within us (Lk 17:21)--and it is crying out for its King. The continual challenge for us is to run from the crowd, from the activities and associations that impede our vision of God, and to run toward those activities and associations that nurture and cherish those seeds of desire latent

¹ *Homilies*, # 62, p. 513; emphasis added.

² *Homilies*, #62, p. 512.

within us. We have a yearning to offer thanks and glory to God for His clearly visible presence in our world; yet we are so often inclined to suppress the truth that lies within (Rom 1:17-21). It is the suppression of this inner awareness that sullies our hearts when they so need to be purified. “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

The tangible and practical way in which we run from the crowd, from those things that obscure our spiritual vision, is by ascetic effort. As Saint Paul says of himself, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (I Cor 9:27). The core of our ascetic effort is given in the Sermon on the Mount, in a text that we read on the weekend prior to entering Great Lent: “*When* you give alms, *When* you pray, *When* you fast,” (Mt 6:2,5,16). Our Lord does not say *if*, but *when*. These three practices are essential to cleansing our spiritual vision, to placing us in a position to be seen by Him. These three ascetic themes continue to resound throughout the hymns we sing during Great Lent. Almsgiving attacks our greed and selfishness. Prayer battles our discouragement, despondency and unbelief. Fasting confronts our gluttony and lusts. Running from the crowd in these ways is how we put ourselves in a position to see God.

Traversing The Narrow Way

This threefold exhortation from our Lord, however, is intended not only to focus our attention on the importance of ascetic practices but also to warn us of the ever-present dangers surrounding these practices. “Beware,” He cautions, “not to practice your righteousness before men, in order to be seen by them” (Mt 6:1). Vainglory, the desire to be seen by others, is the relentless saboteur of our ascetic effort. We long to be seen by others, to be acknowledged, appreciated, thanked, liked. We live our mental lives with a quiet but incessant background conversation imagining what others are thinking of us. Indeed, our worst enemy is not what others are in fact thinking about us, but what we think they are thinking about us. This is a tremendous trap from which we are not easily extricated. St. John Chrysostom highlights this self-obsession with being seen by others.

Jesus roots out what remains: the most tyrannical passion of all, the rage and madness with respect to vainglory, which springs up in them that do right. ... For this disease is by no means of random birth; but when we have duly performed many of the commandments. It behooved therefore first to implant virtue, and then to remove the passion which mars its fruit. And see with what He begins, with fasting, and prayer, and almsgiving: for in these good deeds most especially vainglory is accustomed to make its haunt.³

³ *Homilies on Matthew*, #19.1.

On the one hand, we are exhorted to practice almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and on the other hand we are immediately told how dangerous these practices are. St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov) expresses the dilemma of engaging in ascetic effort while avoiding its attendant dangers.

Bodily discipline is essential in order to make the ground of the heart fit to receive the spiritual seeds and bear spiritual fruit. ... Neglect of bodily discipline makes men like animals, who give free rein and scope to their bodily passions; but excess makes men like devils and fosters the tendency to pride. ... Those who ... put all their trust in bodily discipline, seeing in it their merit and worth in God's sight, fall into vainglory, self-opinion, presumption, pride, hardness and obduracy, contempt of their neighbors, detraction and condemnation of others, rancour, resentment, hate, blasphemy, schism, heresy, self-deception and diabolic delusion.⁴

It is a narrow way that leads between the self-indulgent life of the beast and the self-aggrandizing life of the demon, but the one who by God's grace navigates this narrow path reaps the true reward of seeing Him, and being seen by Him.

Combating Vainglory

It is a repeated refrain of our Lord that those who practice their ascetic effort before others have their reward already, and will receive no reward from their Father in heaven (Mt 6:1,2,5,16). St Gregory states the matter rather soberly:

To those who live for vainglory and not for Him, He will definitely say at the future judgment, in accordance with his words in the Gospel, "You received your reward during your lifetime," just as Abraham said to that rich man in the flames, "Thou in thy lifetime receivest good things" (Lk 16:25).⁵

Our Lord, however, promises that our Father in heaven will reward those who practice these things *without falling prey to vainglory* (Mt. 6:4,6,18). Furthermore, He goes on to offer very practical guidance for how to combat vainglory: as much as possible, practice your ascetic effort in secret. When giving alms, do not let your right hand know what your left is doing (Mt 6:3). When praying, go into your closet and shut the door (Mt 6:6). When fasting, don't do or say anything to draw attention to yourself (Mt 6:17).

Our Lord is offering extremely practical advice which turns out to be much more challenging than at first glance for we quickly discover that we have lost motivation to perform the activities.

⁴ *The Arena*, pp. 138-9.

⁵ *Homilies*, # 7, p. 51.

We are no longer so interested in giving or praying or fasting when we are invisible to others' eyes and ears. And in this way it is revealed to us just how vainglorious we are--how much we depend on being seen and appreciated for our most fundamental spiritual motivations. This, then, is where the ascetic struggle to purify our inner life truly begins. Having had our unrighteous thoughts and motivations brought to our awareness, we can now persevere in confessing these sins to God and letting him cleanse us from all our unrighteousness (I Jn 1:9), especially our impure motives.

Obtaining Our Desire

If we are able to travel through this narrow way by engaging in ascetic practices in secret, navigating between beastly self-indulgence and demonic self-advertisement, then there awaits for us not a reward given by men but by our heavenly Father (Mt 6:4,6,18). What is this reward? St. John Chrysostom describes it for us:

Setting for him a great and august assemblage of spectators, and what He desires, that very thing bestowing on him in great abundance. "For what," He asks, "do you wish? Is it not to have some to be spectators of what is going on? Behold then, you have some; not angels, nor archangels, but *the God of all*."⁶

We will be seen, St. John says, not by men, nor by angels nor archangels, but by God Himself. How beautiful this is. In the quietness of our secret acts, where no one else can see us, we will experience the eyes of God on us. Our desire to be seen by others is not so much a desire that is to be destroyed as it is a misdirected desire that must be reoriented. It is the perversion of the desire to be seen by God. And the way to redirect our desire is to isolate ourselves from those contexts in which we seek after approval from anyone other than God alone. If we are diligent on this path, it will be a tortuous process. But just as Zacchaeus' longing to see Jesus caused him to run away from the crowd and be in place to be seen by Jesus, so too our longing to see God can move us to engage in the ascetic practices in secret and thereby come to experience the reward of the heavenly Father's eyes upon us.

This interpretive insight is not limited to Chrysostom; St. Gregory Palamas echoes and elaborates upon it:

Let us imitate David, brethren, and not only turn our backs on lush and dissipated living, but undertake fasts, psalmody and prayers, *as if God were present and watching*. We know that fasting, psalmody and prayer by themselves cannot save us, but carrying them

⁶ *Homilies on Matthew*, #19; emphasis added.

out *before God* can. For *when the Lord's eyes are upon us* they sanctify us, as the sun warms everything upon which it shines.⁷

This is yet another beautiful image: as sun warms everything it shines on so our Lord's eyes sanctify us. It is not our ascetic effort that purifies us. That is merely running away from the crowd and climbing a tree; it places us into a position to be seen by God, to have His eyes on us. But it is His sanctifying eyes that purify us, cleansing our spiritual sight, and opening our eyes to see Him. It is misleading to think of purifying ourselves so that we can see God. Rather, we strive with all the longing of Zacchaeus to put ourselves into a position to see Him, but only in time and by His grace do we become aware of His sanctifying eyes on us--we see Him because He sees us. It is a great mystery for us no less so than it was for Zacchaeus.

St Gregory continues with practical and sober advice:

When our understanding gazes intently on God and, while looking towards Him, fasts, sings psalms and prayers, then we are carrying out these actions before God. If during prayer and psalmody our mind is sometimes directed toward God and sometimes slips away and floats about, it is necessary to realize that we have not yet dedicated ourselves completely to God and that the purpose behind our actions is not wholly in accordance with the law of the Lord. The more we fall short in righteous works, *the less we are able to remain in God's sight*.⁸

St Gregory's exhortation is not intended to discourage us, but rather to remind us that the process of purification is a long road. He calls us to recognize the indications of our incomplete dedication to God, to admit them before God, and to let that confession be the occasion for yet closer communion with Him. We need not be disheartened but rather encouraged to continue traveling the narrow way for the one who endures to the end will be saved (Mt 10:22; Mt 24:13; Mk 13:13).

Illumined By The Son

I once asked Fr. Roman (Braga) how to stop thinking about people looking at me. He replied with such loving gentleness, "Oh Father, no one is looking at you. The only eyes that are on you are God's. And He's looking at you from inside your heart." I didn't know at the time that this spiritual insight was the continuing echo of earlier holy fathers, with a little addition: that God looks at us from inside our hearts. The ascetic fathers often understand Christ's command to enter one's closet to pray as a command to enter the closet of one's own heart.⁹ Separating

⁷ *Homilies*, # 9, pp. 63; emphasis added.

⁸ *Homilies*, # 9, pp. 63-4; emphasis added.

⁹ See, e.g., Aphrahat's "Demonstration IV, §10 in Brock, 1987, p.14.

ourselves from others to pray is simply to remove ourselves from the distractions that make finding our heart so difficult. So it is here, in the heart, when we can free ourselves from outer and inner disturbances, that we can meet God: see Him, and be seen by Him.

Even though I yearned for such a truth to be true of me, my focus was sadly on the distraction, “What do you mean no one is looking at me? All sorts of people are!” In time, however, I came across an interpretation from St. John Chrysostom in quite a different context--or maybe not so different at all. In commenting on the Lord’s description of His return, saying “the sun shall be darkened” (Mt 24:29), St John has this to say:

But how does He come? The very creation being then transfigured, for “the sun shall be darkened,” not destroyed, *but overcome by the light of His presence*; “Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in Heaven;” that is, *the cross being brighter than the sun*, since the sun will be darkened, and hide himself, and the cross will appear when it would not appear, unless it were far brighter than the beams of the sun.¹⁰

What a stunning and powerful image St. John provides! The sun does not burn out, but its light cannot even be noticed in the presence of the radiant and bright beauty of our Lord’s appearing. The light of God’s presence outshines everything else, and everything is overcome through the divine light. So too, when we enter our inner closet and experience God’s eyes on us, His sanctifying gaze darkens the gaze of all others, and extinguishes our thoughts about their thoughts, overcoming the tyrannical passion of vainglory.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, by almsgiving and prayer and fasting, let us run with Zacchaeus from those things that obstruct our vision; let us secretly climb into the closet of our heart; and let us patiently wait for our heavenly Father to come and shine His sanctifying eyes upon us -- from within our hearts. Let Him alone fulfill the deepest longings nestled within us.

¹⁰ *Homilies on Matthew*, # 76.3; emphasis added.