

Eve of the Great Fast – Prayer, Fasting & Almsgiving

*Delivered by Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian
St. Sarkis Armenian Church. Carrollton, TX
February 26, 2017
Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1-21*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tomorrow is the first day of Lent. This is the forty days before Holy Week during which we usually are told to “give something up”. But where does Lent come from? The origins of Lent can be found in the ancient Church, at a time when catechumens (those still learning the Christian faith) would fast and come to church every day to learn about this new faith. They would learn and grow so that they would ultimately be baptized on the eve of the Resurrection (Easter Eve) and receive their first Holy Communion during Easter Liturgy. St. Cyril of Jerusalem was one of the greatest preachers and teachers during Lent and we still have his sermons. He, along with all the priests at the time, would emphasize and stress the importance of three Christian tools: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Throughout the past seventeen centuries the purpose of Lent remained the same, but the audience has changed. We have taken the place of the catechumens, learning and growing in our faith and mastering the tools we have been given in preparation for Holy Week and the Resurrection of Christ. Naturally we are called to use our tools throughout the year, but Lent gives us an opportunity to focus and refine our skills.

For that reason today’s Gospel reading was about these tools. We at St. Sarkis want to help everyone utilize these tools, so if we cannot keep the fast because we do not know how to cook Lenten meals, let me know and I will introduce you to anyone of our grandmas who will definitely be willing to teach you. If we do not how to help the poor, our ACYOA together with the St. Sarkis School is running a canned food drive during this Lenten season for the less fortunate. We also have the opportunity to donate to FAR (Fund for Armenian Relief) which has many projects that will take place in Armenia and help the orphans, disabled and poor. And finally for prayer, during this Lenten season, I usually have a sermon series and this year’s theme will be on the Lord’s Prayer, helping us understand how to pray.

But even if we do all these things, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, it does not mean we are pleasing to God, as we heard in today’s Gospel. Sometimes people use prayer, fasting and almsgiving to gain praise and glory from other men and to show off their piety.

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Knowing this, a man once asked Abba Anthony, “What must one do in order to please God?” The old man replied, “Pay attention to what I tell you. Keep it and you will be saved: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes, whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures, in whatever place you sit, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will live.”

These are simple, but difficult principles to follow. We must keep God before us, even in the chaos of life, seeing Him in each other, in nature and in our daily actions. We must live not allowing the words of friends, society or the world, to be our guide, but the Word of God. And finally, we must stay put, even when things are tough. So often we are taught that when we are uncomfortable, we must move and leave, avoiding conflicts and confrontations.

So during this Lenten season, let us use the tools of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to grow in faith, but also remember the words of St. Anthony, so that our prayers, fasting and almsgiving be acceptable to God.

Amen.