My Beloved Ones,

In thinking about this week’s Gospel reading, there is a detail that could say much about why the Church has chosen it for this period of the Nativity Fast.

St. Luke the Evangelist tells us that Christ is preaching in a synagogue, when a woman approaches Him. This woman has a bent back and has not been able to straighten herself for 18 years. “When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.’” (Luke 13:12-14)

While we know that Jesus was criticized for choosing to heal on the Sabbath, what is surprising is that the leader of the synagogue does not attack Christ, but instead criticizes the woman: “…come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” Our Lord, of course, is indignant at the lack of mercy shown by the leader of the synagogue, who sacrificed the Spirit of the Law for the Letter: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day? When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.” (Luke 13:15-17)

When I speak of a special detail which ties it to our preparations for the Nativity, what do I mean? Our Lord puts the crowd to shame by showing that they value their own animals more than this woman; and for His examples, He says, “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger…” which not only brought to mind the Feast of the Nativity, but also Isaiah’s prophecy of the humility of the Messiah: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:3)

My beloved ones, as we await the blessedness of the Nativity, we should remember that this Feast, while joyous, serves as a constant reminder to show mercy to others, as we wish they would show to us. The star will lead the Magi, and the angels will bring great joy to the shepherds, but the town of Bethlehem will see a pregnant woman, and they will shut their doors; just as the ruler of the synagogue failed to see a person in need and could only criticize. Do we see the image of our master and Creator when we pass by our fellow men in pain and suffering, or do we fail to understand that, like the ruler, it is not enough to claim to believe in a merciful God, if we do not show mercy to others?

May this Nativity season bring us many opportunities to give to others: to feed and clothe the needy, to offer a kind word to those who are grieving, and to forgive those we are quick to judge. In doing so, only then we be ready to greet our humble King.

+ALEXIOS
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