



My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we prepare for the Great Lenten Fast, our Lord speaks to us plainly on this Forgiveness Sunday, saying, “...if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men.... But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:14-18).

In a world which does not emphasize restraint, it is easy to become one of those who make a public display of their fasting. However, as St. Paul says in this week’s Epistle, “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not

*despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them” (Romans 14:1-3).* If we are truly to follow our Lord to Golgotha, and then to stand before His Empty Tomb, we must remember that fasting is not a kind of diet, but a spiritual discipline, meant to strengthen our prayer and Christian meditation. Therefore, our focus is never on how others see our fasting, but only on our Father, “...who sees in secret...”

Our Lord ends His teaching (and so our preparation for Great Lent) with a reminder that the things of this world will pass to someone else, and, eventually will pass away: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). As we begin our Lenten journey, let us ask ourselves, where are our hearts? What is it that we truly treasure? It is only when we forgive our brothers and sisters, and focus on only our own behaviors and thoughts, that we can be truly said to be rich in those things which are from God: charity, mercy, love, forgiveness.

After all, as St. Paul concludes his letter to the Romans, “Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand” (Romans 14:4). I pray that the Lord our God upholds every one of us, granting us all Καλή δύναμη και Καλή Σαρακοστή! Good strength and a blessed Lent!

**+SEVASTIANOS  
Metropolitan of Atlanta**