

Humble Love

"How happy we are, O people of Israel; we have the advantage of knowing what is pleasing to God." (Baruch 4:4)

Early on, we humans learn to respond to offenses and personal attacks, developing a variety of methods over time to do so. In grade school, we may have rolled up our sleeves and clenched our fists when someone picked on us; or, perhaps we ran away in shame. We may even have employed the adage "an eye for any eye and a tooth for a tooth"—not realizing its origin in the Old Testament—to exact revenge.

Methods of retaliation surely become more sophisticated as we grow. We harbor evil thoughts and concoct elaborate scenarios in our minds to humiliate others. We use our words as weapons to strike and sting. We utilize silence as a powerful and destructive force against a competitor, or as an agonizing, manipulative tool against a loved one who has hurt us. And, we develop defensive and offensive methods to deal with our hurt from being abused, neglected, or taken advantage of.

We deposit layer upon layer of reactive habits upon our soul, until we respond automatically to every insult, unintended slight, and bump in the road with one all encompassing emotion: Anger. No longer do we feel hurt, sorrow, pain, or fear; we just feel angry.

Even in adulthood, our fits of anger triumph over our good will, and we justify both our outward apparent actions and our inward unseen passions. We are not alone. This is a common human condition. We can take some solace in knowing that St. Nicholas, archbishop of Myra in Lycia, whom we celebrate today, is reported to have demonstrated anger. Although beloved throughout the entire Christian and Muslim world for his humility and care for the poor, he fell prey to his anger when he physically assaulted Arius during the First Ecumenical Council.

Our Lord taught us an unyielding way to begin to "unlearn" our natural tendencies and to peel back the outer anger that envelopes our soul: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you" (Luke 6:27–28). St. Paul carried forward the spirit of Christ's words when he wrote: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

Throughout each age, saints, ascetical fathers, and even Christian writers have echoed this central message of the gospel. Dostoevsky, the 19th-century Russian writer, crystallized it in the words of Staretz Zosima, the saintly character in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*:

At some thoughts a man stands perplexed, above all at the sight of human sin, and he wonders whether to combat it by force or by humble love. Always decide: "I will combat it by humble love." If you resolve on that once for all, you can conquer the whole world. Loving humility is a terrible force; it is the strongest of all things, and there is nothing else like it.

Zosima's thoughts remind me of Jesus' powerful and comforting statement: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Our Lord Himself overcame the world by humble love, and we celebrate different expressions of His triumph throughout the liturgical year, particularly at His entrance into Jerusalem and His Cross. Throughout His life and at every turn, our Lord revealed this godly path—in His words and actions.

His Nativity sets the theme. He comes to us, not as a conquering hero, but as a little child—vulnerable, dependent, and requiring human care. In coming to us as an infant, Jesus Christ provides the example of how we are to live our lives and to follow Him. His birth as a babe veils a mystery: the power of love—humble love.

For one of the Old Testament readings at Vespers on December 24th, the church rubrics prescribe the Book of Baruch. I believe it is the only time in the church year that this book is read. On Christmas Eve we hear the following:

Wisdom was seen on earth and He lived with men. Wisdom is the book of the commandments of God, the law that will live forever. All who hold fast to it will live, but those who forsake it will die. Return, O Jacob, and take hold of it; walk in the presence of its brightness, that you may be illuminated. Do not surrender your honor to another people, or your dignity to a strange nation. How happy we are, O people of Israel; we have the advantage of knowing what is pleasing to God. (4:4)

As Christians, we have the advantage of knowing that Christ's example pleases God, His Father.

As we draw near to Christmas, let us try to employ loving humility as that "terrible force," in the words of Dostoyevsky, to overcome our anger and to recover our souls. Let us try to reject our childhood plots and ploys and accept the way of the pure Christ Child.

Following our Lord's path of humble love will not be easy; sadly, our "old self" remains active in our hearts and minds. But remembering what pleases God gives us the opportunity to peel away layers of accumulated emotional debris and to regain the perspective of the newborn Babe.

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