Adam’s Lament (Kontakion at Matins for Cheesefare Sunday)

We stand at the door of Great Lent. On Sunday evening, the vestments will be changed from gold to purple, the lights will be dimmed, and the daily melodies will be sung in a different tonality. At the end of Vespers, the first rite of Lent will take place, in which we will ask forgiveness of each other. As we approach each other, we will recognize in our hearts the ways we have offended one another, either outwardly or inwardly, either overtly or covertly, either by action, avoidance, or omission.

The change in diet required during this fasting period affect us gradually over time. We will feel deprived at first, but by God’s grace, will feel lighter and spiritually attentive as we proceed. The Church will feed, nourish, and sustain us by offering the Eucharist in the middle of the week at the Presanctified Liturgy. The Sacrament of Confession will provide us the opportunity to see ourselves in the light of Christ and to recognize how we have torn asunder our baptismal garment and betrayed Him. The first few days, or perhaps weeks, we will retain some fervor. It will not be long, however, when the little spiritual flame within us will begin to wane.

How can we sustain the flame of the Spirit and feed it? How can we prevent reducing Lent to a mere change of diet or the fulfillment of rules and regulations? How can we guard our senses (eyes, ears, tongues, lips, hands, and so forth) and refrain from sin, and instead extend grace to others? And how can Great Lent become a time for permanent renewal in the Lord instead of a “countdown” until Pascha when we can again resume our normal (i.e., carnal) lives?

First, it is essential to acknowledge that none of our aspirations for holiness can be achieved without God’s help. St. John Cassian wrote:

> Man’s own efforts and human exertions will never make up for the lack of the divine gift, unless it is granted by divine compassion in answer to his prayer.
> —On the Institutes of the Cenobia

So, let’s recognize our own weakness in starting the journey.

Second, it is equally essential to acknowledge that God will not do for us what we must do for ourselves. Thus, St. John balances his initial statement:

> For when we say that human efforts cannot of themselves secure purification without the aid of God, we thus insist that God’s mercy and grace are bestowed only upon those who labor and exert themselves...it is given to them that ask, and opened to them that knock, and found by them that seek.
> —On the Institutes of the Cenobia

So, let’s acknowledge that our (even feeble) efforts at prayer, fasting, and good works are essential.
Let me suggest one possible way that we might proceed in integrating these two pieces of wisdom from St. John Cassian: I encourage you to “ask, knock, and seek” (Matt 7:6–8) this Lenten season by reflecting on the Kontakion that is unique to the Sunday of Cheesefare, sung during the Saturday night Vigil. The text, provided below, is powerful, and, if we use it on a regular basis, it has much to offer our hearts.

During this Lenten season, I invite you to join me in using the Kontakion as your personal prayer, whether daily or weekly. Praying the Kontakion slowly and savoring its truth will produce much spiritual fruit. May we identify with the lament of Adam; may our pierced hearts bring forth our own lament.

Never forget during Lent, however, to let joy emerge amidst sorrow. Joy is an essential “companion” of lamentation because in this season we return to our Father, our “First Love.” In lamenting our sins, we present to God a “broken heart,” which He views as our sacrifice (Ps 51:16–18). Through a broken heart, God restores our joy.

I pray that the Kontakion blesses your journey in a simple yet profound manner. Please share it with your family and friends as well.

On Adam’s Lament

Guide of wisdom, giver of prudence,
Teacher of the foolish and defender of the poor,
Establish and give understanding to my heart, O Master;
Give me a word, O Word of the Father;
For see, I shall not restrain my lips from crying to you:
O Merciful, have mercy on the fallen.

1 Then Adam sat and wept opposite
The delight of Paradise beating his eyes with his hands
And he said:
O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.

2 Share in the pain, O Paradise, of your beggared master
And with the sound of your leaves implore the creator
Not to shut you:
O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.

3 Bend down your trees like living beings and fall before
Him who holds the key, that thus you may remain open
For one who cries:
O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.

4 I breathe the fragrance of your beauty and I melt as I recall
How I delighted there from the sweet scent
Of the flowers:
   *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

5 I am polluted, I am ruined, I am enslaved to my slaves;
   For reptiles and wild beats, whom I subjected by fear,
   Now make me tremble;
   *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

6 My throat, which holy waters had made sweet,
   Has become bitter from the multitude of my groans,
   As I cry out:
   *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

7 How have I fallen? Where have I arrived? From a pedestal to the ground;
   From a divine admonition to a wretched existence
   I have been reduced:
   *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

8 Now Satan rejoices having stripped me of my glory;
   But this gives him no joy; for see, my God
   Clothes me:
   *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

9 God himself pitied me, clothes my nakedness;
   By this he shows me that he too cares
   For me, the transgressor:
   *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

10 Swiftly, Adam, you have understood the wish of my compassion;
    Therefore I do not deprive you of this your hope
    As you cry:
    *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

11 I do not wish nor do I will the death of the one I fashioned;
    But having chastened him enough I will glorify eternally
    The one who cries:
    *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

12 Now therefore, Saviour, save me also who seek for you with longing;
    I do not wish to take you in, but I wish to be taken in by you
    And to cry to you:
    *O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.*

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