

Sermon of St. Philaret on the Forefathers

COMMEMORATING THE RIGHTEOUS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

This Sunday, as well as the next, the Holy Church glorifies the righteous of the Old Testament. The troparion for next Sunday starting with the words, "*Great are the achievements of faith...*" refers to the three Youths who were cast into the Babylonian furnace, and also the Holy Prophet Daniel. The Church sings hymns to the three Youths at every Matins service, remembering the amazing miracle that occurred when they were thrown into the fiery furnace yet remained unharmed. Nebuchadnezzar was king then, and he, drunk with power and proud of his might, ordered a huge statue of gold to be erected on the plain of Dura, a wide-open area near Babylon. At his command, musical instruments would start playing, and everyone would have to fall down and worship this golden image. The three pious youths Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael refused to do so. The King flew into a rage and said to them, "if you do not worship it at that time [that I say], you shall be cast into the burning fiery furnace. Then what god is there who will deliver you from my hands?" (Dan. 3:15) They answered, "**We will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image you set up. Our God can save us from the burning fiery furnace! Even if He deigns not to do so, know all the same that we will not obey your order!**" The Holy Bible does not say exactly what this golden image was. Most likely it was not an image of one of the gods, because the Youths said, "we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image you set up". Tradition tells us that Nebuchadnezzar ordered this statue, this golden image, of himself. When the command was given for the people to fall down before this image, the religious conscience of these youths told them "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" yet here, things of God were being rendered to Caesar, and so they refused. We know about this amazing miracle. The furnace was brought to an incredibly high heat, so much so that when the king's servants cast the holy youths who were bound hand and foot into the flames, the former were burned to death just from being near the entrance. The youths fell bound into the midst of the furnace where the flames were raging, but Nebuchadnezzar saw that they were walking around peacefully, despite having been bound, in the midst of the furnace as if they were in a cool place. They were singing to God and praising Him, and even a fourth person was with them. Nebuchadnezzar was frightened and said, "the fourth is like the Son of God" (Dan. 3:92). A fourth Person was there with them, and they were walking in the midst of the fire as if in a cool place, glorifying God! This is a striking miracle, and when their faith triumphed, and when Nebuchadnezzar saw the God Who was able to save them, he himself praised the God of Israel. He called them out from the furnace, and it turned out that not only were they not burned by the fire, they did not even smell of smoke. And Nebuchadnezzar praised the God whom the three Youths served and worshipped.

There was another example of extraordinary faithfulness to God. The Prophet Daniel lived at the same time as these Youths, but he lived longer, and another king took over the reign. This king loved and trusted him very much, and gave him important assignments, so that the governors of the kingdom envied him greatly. They very much wanted to defame the Prophet Daniel in the eyes of the king, but they were not able to do so because he was beyond reproach in all aspects of his life. Finally, they plotted against him and said to the king, "We want to make your name as great as possible and we would be pleased if you establish a decree that for thirty days no one in the kingdom can turn to anyone else but you with any petition, neither to God nor to any man, except for you, our sovereign ruler." Greatly flattered, the king was taken in by this, not knowing what this would lead to, and gave the decree. When the decree went out, Daniel, who always obeyed the law, saw that obeying this decree meant rendering to Caesar that which belongs only to God. Despite this decree, Daniel continued to do what he did before, that is, at his home he opened the window facing Jerusalem several times a day and prayed in that direction to the temple in Jerusalem, to God Himself. His enemies saw this and ran to the king, and said, "O King, Daniel is not obeying you. What was it that you ordered? He, like before, is turning to God". Only then did the King realize their cunning scheme. He knew that they envied Daniel. He tried to annul the decree, but they said to him, "No, your Majesty, for then your authority will not mean anything! Your rule is firm only when everybody knows that your word is strong, like a diamond. Whatever the king says cannot be changed." The king was deeply saddened, but he had no choice but to give in. The punishment for not obeying the royal decree was for the violator to be cast into the den of lions, a deep pit full of ferocious, hungry lions. This is what was done to Daniel. He was thrown to the lions. The Bible says that

the king was not able to sleep that night, for he loved Daniel and trusted him. He was very grieved. The king rose early in the morning and went in haste to the den of lions. He cried in a loud voice, "Daniel, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the mouth of the lions?" He heard the reply, "Your Majesty, God saved me because I did no wrongdoing in His sight. Neither did I do any wrongdoing before you, your Majesty!" The king rejoiced greatly and gave orders to bring Daniel out of the den, and had the men who brought charges against Daniel thrown into the den. The Bible says that they did not even reach the bottom of the den before the lions leapt up, caught them in the air, and tore them to pieces. The troparion speaks of this miracle that "the Prophet Daniel proved to be a shepherd of lions as of sheep", that is, the powerful, ferocious, and hungry beasts were gentle to him like meek sheep.

Such were the faithfulness of the Three Youths and the Holy Prophet Daniel. We do not have such examples in our day! Such great demands to show our faithfulness to God are not required of us, but we are always betraying Him when we make our choices, either out of faintheartedness, or because we are much too used to yielding to earthly vanities or indulging in our passions. One way or another, we are always making choices in life. We don't have to look far for examples. For instance, our Russian Orthodox people and organizations are always planning parties, dances, concerts, and the like on Saturday evenings. Some people are so used to this and think nothing of it, saying, "Why do the church people get so upset?" If you are a true Orthodox Christian, your place is in church Saturday evenings, when we have festive services. If you are sick, that is another matter, but if not, your place is in church and nowhere else! And you choose: you prefer vain worldly pastimes to church services! Is this permissible? People do not think this through. They are completely overcome by this laxity and lack of resolve. Those examples from ancient times are so relevant and edifying in this regard!

The way people these days treat fasting, they say even Great Lent can be done away with. They also think that the Nativity fast is not important. Remember the other Old Testament righteous martyrs, the seven Maccabean brothers, their teacher Eleazar, and mother Solomonia. They were tortured to death for refusing to eat food forbidden by the law of God. During fasting periods, church law does not allow certain kinds of food, but Christians nowadays do not even want to know, and do not pay any attention at all!

So, I repeat, these Old Testament examples are very telling and very edifying. Of course, the bad thing is that when we talk about all this from the ambo, the very people who should be hearing this are absent, and are somewhere else entirely. This is the way it is. They could learn by listening, and maybe it would get through to them and make them think, but they are depriving themselves of the very opportunity of finding out what an Orthodox person should know, because they are not here, where they should be. If only the Lord would teach us in these years of exile to think more seriously about our Christian responsibilities and what it means to be called an Orthodox Christian and a son or daughter of the Church of Christ! Amen.