

Lent: The Journey to Pascha By Father Alexander Schmemmann

The new life which almost two thousand years ago shone forth from the grave has been given to us on the day of our Baptism...thus on Easter we celebrate Christ's Resurrection as something that happened and still happens to us. For each one of us received the gift of that new life and the power to accept it and live by it. It is a gift which radically alters our attitude towards everything in this world, including death. It makes it possible for us joyfully to affirm: "Death is no more!" Oh, death is still there, to be sure, and we still face it and some day it will come and take us. But it is our whole faith that by His own death Christ changed the very nature of death, made it a *passage*, a "Passover," a "Pascha" – into the Kingdom of God, transforming the tragedy of tragedies into the ultimate victory...

Such is the faith of the Church...is it not our daily experience, however, that this faith is very seldom ours, that all the time we lose and betray the "new life" which we received as a gift, and that in fact we live as if Christ did not rise from the dead, as if that unique event had no meaning whatsoever for us?...We simply forget all this, so busy are we, so immersed in our daily preoccupations—and because we forget, we fail. And through this forgetfulness failure, and sin, our life becomes "old" again—petty, dark, and ultimately meaningless... We live as if He never came. This is the only real sin, the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity.

If we realize this, we may understand what East is and why it presupposes Lent. For we may understand that the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist first of all, in order to help us recover the vision and taste of that new life which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it. How can we love and desire something that we do not know? How can we put above everything else in our life something which we have not seen and enjoyed? In short: how can we seek a kingdom of which we have no idea? It is the worship of the Church that was from the beginning and still is our entrance into, our communion with, the new life of the Kingdom. It is through her liturgical life that the Church reveals to us something of that which "the ear has not heard, the eye has not seen, and what has not yet

entered into the heart of man, but which God has prepared for those who love Him." And in the center of that liturgical life, as its heart and climax, as the sun whose rays penetrate everywhere, stands Pascha. It is the door opened every year into the splendor of Christ's Kingdom, the foretaste of the eternal joy that awaits us, the glory of the victory which already, although invisibly, fills the whole creation: "death is not more!" The entire worship of the Church is organized around Easter, and therefore the liturgical year, i.s., the sequence of seasons and feasts, becomes a journey, a pilgrimage towards Pascha, the End, which at the same time is the Beginning: The End of all that which is "old"; the beginning of the new life, a constant "passage" from "this world" into the Kingdom already revealed in Christ.

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And yet the "old" life, that of sin and pettiness, is no easily overcome and changed. The Gospel expects and requires from man an effort of which, in his present state, he is virtually incapable...For even the Apostles, when they heard their Master's teaching, asked Him in despair, how is this possible? It is not easy, indeed, to reject a life made up of daily cares, of search for material goods, security, and pleasure, for...the goal: "Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." This world through all its "media" says: be happy, take it easy, follow the broad way. Christ in the Gospel says: choose the narrow way, fight and suffer, for this is the road to the only genuine happiness. ...This is where Great Lent comes in. This is the help which alone will make it possible for us to receive Easter...indeed as the end of the "old" in us, as our entrance into the "new."

A journey, a pilgrimage! Yet, as we begin it, as we make the first step into the "bright sadness" of Lent, we see—far, far away—the destination. It is the joy of Easter, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom. And it is the vision, the foretaste of Easter, that makes Lent's sadness bright and our Lenten effort a "spiritual spring." The night may be dark and long, but all along the way a mysterious and radiant dawn seems to shine on the horizon. "Do not deprive us of our expectation, O lover of Man!"