First Day of Lent

These are the first words of the Prayer of Sunrise from the service of the same name, *Arevakal*, in the Armenian Orthodox Church. We are reminded today that just as the Sun rises from the East and travels to the West, shining its light, radiating its heat, so too we find God everywhere. We find the presence of God everywhere and anywhere where there is life, where there is love.

On this first day of Lent, our Church Fathers direct us to the Gospel of St. Matthew asking us to keep in mind our three main obligations during the Lenten journey: Giving, prayer and fasting. While fasting is more formulated, in other words, keeping away from meat with dietary restrictions, and while prayer gives us an opportunity for conversation, giving is the action element to the Lenten cycle.

We will be looking at all three of these elements – giving, prayer and fasting – in detail in the next few days. For today, as a primer, we will look at all three of them in the context we find in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, specifically from the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew Chapter 6: *And Jesus says Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. For whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may be praised by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. For when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your alms may be done in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Secondly, Jesus talks about prayer: *And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door. And pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.*

And regarding fasting, Jesus says, *And whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you they have received their reward. For when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.*

The first day of Lent is a time for a fresh start. Do not approach Lent as an obligation but approach it as an opportunity to grow. This 40 day period is an *opportunity* not a responsibility. In the Scriptural passages above we see that giving, prayer and fasting are *private* opportunities to build on your relationship with God. The Lenten Journey is between *you and God*. It is a time for reflection and introspection.

During the next 40 days you will see what is really important in your life. Remember, after Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness he was tempted to change the stones into bread to feed his physical hunger. His answer, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God" is the cornerstone to the Lenten Journey. We are reminded that there is so much more to life than our physical existence. There is a soul which has spiritual hunger. These next 40 days will give you the opportunity to see what is necessary in your life. You will find that prayer, fasting and giving, will connect you to a higher reality. Remember, it is between you and God, and God is "From the East to the West...", that is, He is everywhere, within and without you. St. Nectarous says, "Seek God within your heart and not outside of it." It is just between you and God. Lent is between you and all of life. Take advantage! Here's an opportunity like no other.

Let us now pray the prayer of St. Nerses Shnorhali (the Graceful):
Oh Christ, Guardian of All, let your right hand guard and shelter me by day and by night; while home and while away; while sleeping and while awake that I may never fall. Have mercy upon all your creatures, and upon me, a great sinner.

Father Vazken Movsesian