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Great Barekendan

(Genesis, Chapter 2)

Although this Sunday is not a day of Lent (as the five Sundays following it are), the Armenian Church opens the series of Sundays of Lent with Barekendan. To distinguish this Sunday from the other ten Barekendan Sundays, it is called “great” or “Real Barekendan”. The word “Barekendan” means joyful, happy and vital living. For this reason, the first Barekendan Sunday is marked especially by general festivities.

No other Sunday among the Church Sundays is observed so carefully as this one, though corrupted from its original meaning. It may be assumed that these festivities are due, perhaps, to the re-alization of the onset of the forty to fiftydays of Lent. Consequently, people would be making the most out of the occasion thus presented to enjoy food and have a good time. This opinion, however, is only partly correct.

In fact, Great Barekendan commemorates the happy, careless and innocent life of the ancestors of Mankind – Adam and Eve – in Paradise.

This Sunday, besides reminding us that man is created happy and put in a happy environment, suggests also the idea that man is destined to everlasting happiness. The Holy Bible, as well as man’s experience, testifies to the truthfulness of this idea. A child under normal conditions (not perfect or ideal conditions) is the happiest creature in the universe. His happiness is seldom dependent upon outsiders but springs from within his little self. A heap of sand is enough to make him happy for hours. The mere appearance of a butterfly suffices to set his heart a-tremble with boundless enjoyment. It is as if everything in nature exists to make him happy.

A child truly comprises in himself/herself and symbolizes the infancy of the human race. And, to be sure, the days in Paradise of Adam and Eve – our ancestors – remind us all the attractions of our own childhood and the beauty of such projections, all found to be recorded in the first pages of the Bible. The day when the child starts to distinguish between “good and evil”, the moment “his eyes are opened” ... he begins to lose his innocence of childhood and his happiness as well. The next Sunday will explain this idea more.

The story and the meaning of the Second Sunday of Lent is the continuation of the Barekendan. This Sunday is dedicated to the loss of man's happiness and his "expulsion from paradise".

The real cause of the expulsion of first men from paradise was not because they ate from the forbidden fruit; but because they disobeyed God. Moreover, when God gave them a chance to confess their misconduct and repent, they blamed another for their bad actions.

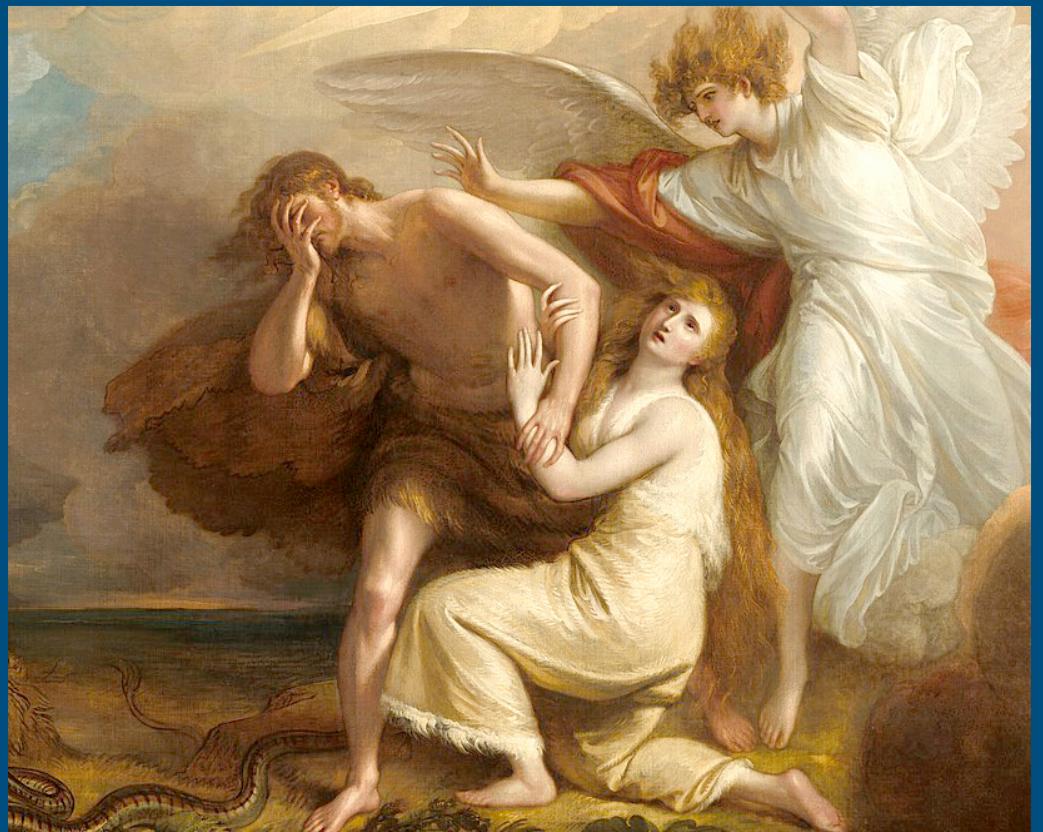
Expulsion Sunday also reminds us, about the tragedy of the loss of innocence known to our forefathers. In fact every sin means the disobeying of the obvious Will of God; which will call upon the sinner still another bitter punishment, namely, deprivation from happiness, offered by God, and expulsion from His presence.

However, the goodness of God does not allow that man lose everything forever. He gives man hope and provides him with the opportunity to regain his "Lost paradise".

This spirit of the mercifulness of God is represented in the next Sunday of the Lenten period, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, which contains a most thrilling parable.

SUNDAY OF EXPULSION

(Genesis 3:1-24)



SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

(Luke 15:11-32)

The features that have been mentioned as being characteristic of the previous two Sundays, namely, happiness and its loss, are repeated also by this Sunday. The sole idea of this Sunday is the ascension; man's rise from fall and his return to the place from where he was expelled. This Sunday and the two Sundays following it take their names from the main parables included in the lections of those days.

According to the central parable of this Sunday, the "younger son" of a happy family desires to leave his father's home for a far country. As Adam and Eve, so also this young man was not satisfied with what he had and enjoyed. In other words, this boy does not know and consequently can not appreciate the value of what he owns and therefore he wishes after the pleasures of a "far country".

After some time the Prodigal Son lost almost everything he had – riches, beauty and honor. He had willingly lost the presence of a father and the sweetness of a home. He who had started his expectations to obtain a better life found himself in dire poverty and in the company of swine. All these miseries, however, made it possible for him to find the most important thing, that is, the appreciation of what he had enjoyed previously. Besides being starved the Prodigal Son is now immensely in need of his father's love and is longing for his home. His father's love, which he feels now only in its entire purity, attracts him as does a magnetic force. He desires to be with his father and family – if not even as a "son", at least as a "hired servant". The discovery of the values he has lost, forces him to become roused and forsake the company of the pigs.

The center of gravity of the parable lies in these words: "I will rise and go to my father". These words contain the whole meaning of the Sunday. The rest is a familiar story. The Prodigal Son, restored in his former position and happiness, now is minded of what he possesses, that is, his father's riches. We may say, he has become a steward managing the properties of the family.

Hence, next Sunday contains the parable of the Steward.



SUNDAY OF THE STEWARD

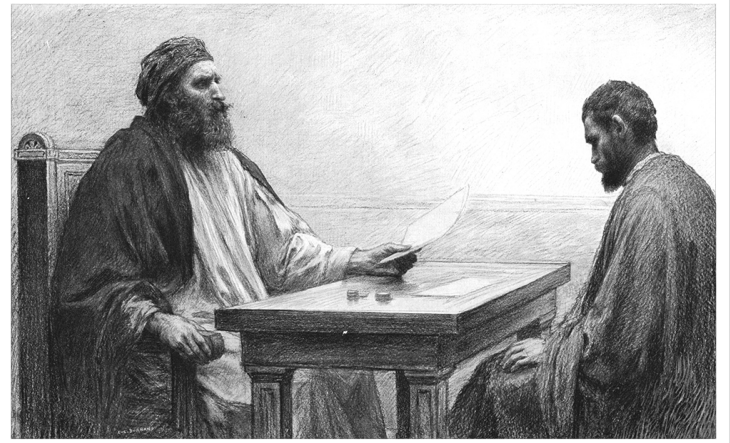
(LUKE 16:1-13)

The steward is the highest class functionary of the great and noble families of ancient times; he controls the entire finances of the family and administers almost all the affairs of the house.

In this parable, the sin of the steward is the same as that of the prodigal son: spend-thrift-ness; that is, using for other purposes properties entrusted to him. Both the prodigal son and the steward spend the belongings of others for their personal use.

The parable of the steward is rightly considered to be one of the most difficult parables of the Gospel to understand. In order to understand this parable one has to differentiate as between the explanation of the “sons of light”, from the “sons of this world”. There exists for Jesus but two classes of men. The first class is composed of those who live just for this world and according to its laws. The people of the second class are those who live for heaven and consequently in accordance with the laws of God. By this parable, Jesus takes an example from the life of the “sons of this world” to give the “sons of light” a lesson and instruction.

The steward of the Gospel is a fraudulent person and is qualified as “unrighteous”. He is a typical “son of this world”, very clever, smart and far-sighted. He is a man who knows how to make profit from all the opportunities provided him for personal benefit. He wastes the possessions of his landlord for his personal use, instead of using them for the family. The landlord, having been informed of the fraud, decides to dismiss him and, therefore, invited him to give an accounting. The shrewd steward uses even this critical situation for his material security. To gain their friendship, he discounts the debts of his landlord’s debtors so that, when he is put out of office, he may be welcomed to their houses. The landlord learns about this new unfaithfulness, too, but he acts like a “gentleman son of the world”. The Gospel says: “The Lord commended the unjust steward for his prudence”.



The parable ends at this point and Jesus, in further elucidation, makes this remark: “For the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light; and I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations”.

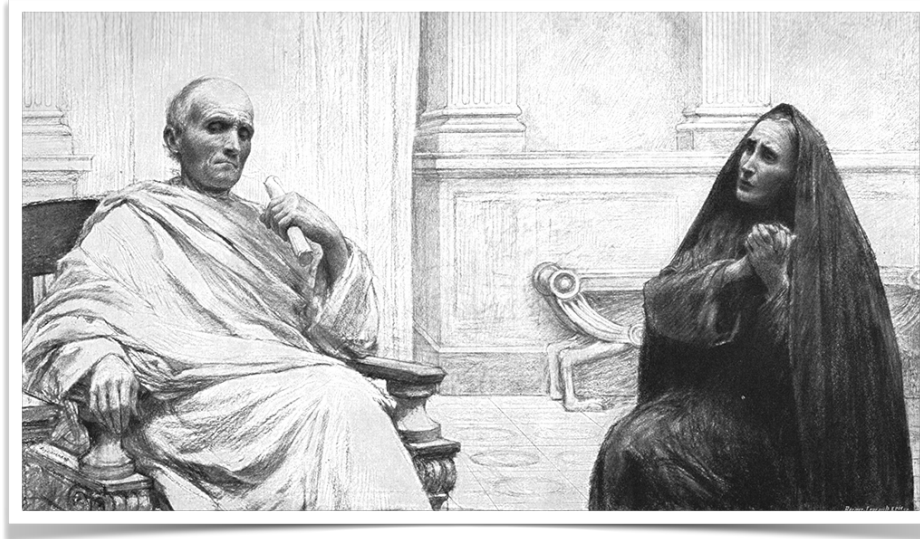
The Sunday of the Steward also urges us to use “the mammon of unrighteousness”, that is, material fortune and brain, to buy “eternal tabernacles” or mansions. Besides, the ability to use “the mammon of unrighteousness” correctly is a guarantee that we will be able to utilize beneficially “the true one”, that is, the lasting riches – our spiritual capacities. For if we can not make use of the material which is “foreign” to our nature, no one will give us that which is “our own”, namely, the “talents” of the “sons of light”.

The central instruction of this parable is encouraging also for those who, though “not far from salvation”, but being occupied by worldly problems, can not yet devote time to lay up spiritual treasures for themselves. We may have friends in heaven by performing benefactions in this world; for each person is an intercessor for his benefactor by the throne of God. However, if one of the conditions for our admittance into the “eternal tabernacles” is the good management of the worldly riches, derived from a good stewardship, the other condition is the prayer.

To that idea is dedicated the next Sunday, the Sunday of the Judge.

SUNDAY OF THE JUDGE

(LUKE 18:1-8)



This Sunday is dedicated to the idea of prayer, the aim of which is explained in the first lines of the Gospel reading of the day: “And He (Jesus) told them a parable to the effect that they “ought always to pray, and not lose heart”.

The judge of the parable (by which the Sunday is named) is another “son of this world”, who “neither feared God nor had regard for man”. The other person in the scene is a widow, the victim of an iniquity, who asks the judge to do her justice. But the judge pays her no attention because he cannot make a profit from her. The widow, however, tirelessly presses her complaints before the judge, who, like the steward of the previous Sunday, was said to be “unjust”. The judge finally renders a decision only to get rid of her and sends her away.

The widow is a symbol of humanity which feels itself very weak in face of passions and other external violence. The human being, therefore, earnestly appeals to God to save him of those forces. Very often God is “long-suffering”, that is, He does not answer our prayers so quickly and in the way we ask him to. But the parable teaches us “not to lose heart”. If a godless and impudent judge finally submits to the supplication of the widow, shall not God, the good and the righteous, hear and “avenge His servants who cry to Him day and night?”

The teaching of this parable is encouraging particularly for those people who are suffering

and for those who are persecuted in their search for justice. But it is not enough to pray just saying: “Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; preserve me from violent men” (Psalms 140:1). It is necessary to be and remain a “servant” of God. Those who declare themselves in word or deed beyond the laws of God, can not secure His protection; but those who stay in His service and cry: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth”, may receive an answer, sometimes, such as “rest a little longer”, for God has promised that He will avenge the blood of His servants on their torturers (Revel. 6:10-11, 19:2).

Therefore, beyond the faithful administration of the problems of mammon and life, earnest and perseverant prayer is one of the fundamental conditions by which a person might remain in his Father’s house and in the position he has there regained.

The last line of the parable concludes with the meaning of the Sunday, which is the seeking of justice through prayer. Further, it establishes the essential condition without which prayer could never be serving its goal. That fundamental condition is Faith.

In the meantime, however, the curtain is opened and we face the next Sunday: “Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will He find faith on earth”?

SUNDAY OF ADVENT

(MATT. 22:34-23:39)



To close the golden chain of the Sundays of Lent, it would be impossible to find a more appropriately meaningful name for it, than the Sunday of Advent. This closure is particularly meaningful for the fact that the Sunday of Advent is dedicated not only to the Second Coming of Christ but also to His First Coming, as stated by the hymn (sharagan) of the day.

This Sunday, in commemorating the First Coming of Jesus, aims at refreshing our minds of the fundamental truth that our rise from fall and our restoration may be possible only by the incarnation of Christ and by other ministrations attached to it.

The main idea, moreover, contained in the Gospel Reading of the day's Divine Liturgy is the fact that Christ was the expected Messiah and the Savior of mankind. Jesus himself asks: "What do you think of Christ (the Messiah)? Whose son is he? ..." All the books of the New Testament ascertain that there will be a Second Coming of Christ, who will come this time not as a gentle and lowly Savior, but as a righteous judge. He will come in the glory of His Father surrounded by angels to judge humanity as the shepherd who separates sheep from goats.

Our eternal destiny will be decided by the good deeds (deeds of faith) that we have or have not done. The "everlasting" life will be inherited by those who have given food to the hungry, a hand to the fallen, and consolation to the afflicted. Those who have not performed such charities will be deprived of the highest reward. It is not said, however, what will be the destiny of those who have grabbed the food of the hungry or those who have caused suffering all about them. Even the "miracles" that we might have wrought in the name of Christ, even these will not be considered to be sufficient for gaining eternal life, because we have still failed to reconcile a single broken heart.

The most significant sequence of the Lenten Sundays comes to an end by the mention of the greatest drama of the universe. But the drama of life does not end with the Second Coming of Christ and with the scenes related to it. On the contrary, the Second Coming of Christ opens a new era, a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be neither "Lent nor the necessities that make Lent indispensable". "Joy, gladness and justice" will then dwell there. The inhabitants of the place will be only "the conquerors", that is, the conquerors over evil.

PALM SUNDAY

MATT. 21:1-11



As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

“Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”