

Abib

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2025-07-13: 3rd Sunday of Abib - Characteristics of Successful Ministry

Visual Aid

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/gu5rqgryzykuo30ia5msx/Characteristics-of-Ministry.pptx?rlkey=pox4bbo5yxlbojoq2vq3onfr&dl=0>

Background

Today is the 3rd Sunday of the Blessed Month of Abib. The Church arranges for us the readings of the Coptic Month of Abib to be about our fathers the apostles and their ministry. At the beginning of the month, we are fasting the Fast of the Apostles and on the 5th day the Feast of the martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul. So the focus of the readings for the whole month, takes from this and we see how the Lord supports the Apostles in their ministry.

- In the 1st Sunday, we read the gospel of the commission of the 70 Apostles when the Lord Jesus sent them and gave them instructions about the ministry.
- In the 2nd Sunday, we read the gospel of the Lord warning the Apostles against becoming a stumbling block and the message was about the offenses of the ministry.
- Today, in the 3rd Sunday, we read the gospel of the feeding of the multitude and we see the administration of the ministry.
- Next week, in the 4th Sunday, we will read about the raising of Lazarus, and God willing, we will see the gifts of the ministry.

Introduction

The Gospel reading today is from Luke 9:10-17 - it is the same Gospel Reading that we pray in the 9th hour of the Agpeya. And there are many messages that we can take from it related to ministry and service. Before we look at today's Gospel, let's ask ourselves the question of "who are the ministers?" Lest anyone think "well I'm not a servant so this message is not relevant to me"

Does service only apply to those who are serving in an official capacity? What if I am not serving in Sunday School or Youth Meetings or Bible Studies or Hymns Classes? What if I am not a deacon? What if I don't serve in the kitchen service or the cleaning service or the orphan service? Does that mean these gospel readings are not relevant to me?

Definitely not. As Christians, we are ALL called to be servants.

Minister to One Another

"For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13).

- Liberty means freedom; free from the bondage of the sin - don't use your freedom as an opportunity to serve yourself, to entertain yourself, to give in to your passions, to satisfy the lusts of the flesh... but use your freedom to serve one another through love. True Christian freedom is to make myself a servant and to give to others

"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." (1 Peter 4:10)

- When I use my talents to serve others, I am acting as a good steward of God's grace

We are all called to serve one another, and to be ministers to one another. To use our talents to support our brothers and sisters. And to be good stewards of God's grace. To love one another.

Minister in My Responsibilities

In addition to that, I may have other roles or responsibility that require me to minister to others.

- A husband is responsible for serving his wife.
- A wife is responsible for serving her husband
- A mother and father are responsible for serving their children
- A son or daughter is responsible for serving his or her parents - especially as they get older
- In my workplace, I can serve my co-workers
- In my classroom, I can serve my peers

Minister to My Own Soul

On top of that, I need to minister to my own soul - as St Paul writes to the Philippians:

"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12)

So we will look at several characteristics of the Lord's Ministry that I can apply to myself as ministering to others, as ministering in my responsibility as a parent, spouse, son, daughter, etc. and ministering to my own soul.

The Impartial Ministry

The first important lesson from the Lord's Ministry in this chapter is that it is an **Impartial Ministry**. The Lord did not turn the people away.

First of all, the people followed Him without invitation in the first place - we read that the Lord took the disciples and "went aside privately into a deserted place belonging to the city called Bethsaida"

- He is going to take private retreat with His disciples in a deserted place. "But when the multitudes knew it, they followed Him."

How did the Lord react to this? We read in the Gospel "and He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing."

He received them, and gave them sermons, and did good works for them. And then when the disciples wanted to turn them away to go and find food, the Lord again accepted them and said "you give them to eat."

The Impartial Ministry or the Welcoming Ministry.

- Sometimes, I don't want to serve others because it is inconvenient for me. The time is not convenient. I don't feel like it.
- Sometimes, I only serve those who can serve me back - who can repay me, or who did something for me in the past
- Sometimes, I only serve those who are nice to me and love me and do good for me and make me happy
- Sometimes, I only serve those who have good reputations or are popular
- Sometimes, I only serve those who I know them very well and I spent a lot of time with them and I know their family

The Gospel in Vespers last night had this message for us. The Lord was invited to the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees and said to him: "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:12-14)

St Paul in the Pauline Epistle today, writes to St Timothy "Now godliness with contentment is great gain." - Serve without expecting a reward. Serve with contentment. Content with the food on your plate and the clothes on your back - "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."

The Lord did not turn them away. He didn't say "well you aren't from My 70 Apostles." He didn't say "the time is not convenient, I am here in a private gathering." He didn't say sorry, the time is inconvenient. But instead He accepted them, welcomed them, and ministered to them.

Let me do the same when I minister to others.

- When I ask about someone - how is he doing, how is his health, how is his family, how is his work, where has he been
- When I give a smile
- When I encourage someone
- When I show appreciation
- When I comfort someone who is mourning
- When I visit someone who is lonely or someone who is sick

- When I give a compliment
- When I honor or respect someone
- When I helping someone with their needs financially or with clothes or furniture or medicine
- When I am offering up my talents - maybe I am good with computers, or I am able to cook, or I know how to sew and to tailor clothes, or I am good with plumbing or electricity or HVAC, or I can help diagnose an issue with the car, or help with a medical issue, or I can tutor someone in a specific subject, or accompany someone to an appointment.

Whether it's someone I know, or my friends, or a stranger, or even my enemy - the Lord says: "Do good to those who hate you" (Matthew 5:44)

So our first characteristic of successful ministry is Impartial Ministry.

The Holistic Ministry

The Lord did not turn anyone away, and He gave them the spiritual food, and even healed them from their sicknesses. But why did the Lord feed the multitude? The disciples recommended sending them away to find supplies elsewhere. Isn't it enough that the Lord gave them the spiritual food, and even healed them from their infirmities and sicknesses?

The second lesson we can take from the Lord's Ministry is that it is a **Holistic Ministry**

- Everyone of us has a body, has a spirit, has an intellect, has emotions, has relationships.
 - St Paul writes at the end of 1 Thessalonians: "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." - spirit soul and body
 - The Lord didn't just minister to the spirit, but also to the intellect, to the emotions, to the body
 - For example when He healed a leper, He didn't just heal his physical infirmity, but He touched him. A man that had not been touched by another person in so long, the Lord touches him to show him that he is loved, that he is human, that he is not alone. And then he told him to show himself to the priest and offer a sacrifice and to do the spiritual part. The Lord in His Ministry was always holistic, looking at the whole individual.
- The Church also serves Her congregation holistically as well.
 - For example in Sunday School, our children enjoy a lesson and activities which is an intellectual and spiritual meal
 - Then, they are given time to play sports and play outside and breathe fresh air - physical activity and physical health
 - They are encouraged to play together and to build and strengthen godly friendships

I also need to minister holistically to those whom I am called to serve

- For example, as a parent, I am responsible for the well-being of my children in all aspects of their lives...

- I need to provide for them physically - to give them good and healthy food, to encourage them to breathe the fresh air outside, to play sports or exercise, to bathe and brush their teeth and take care of their hygiene
 - I need to provide them with adequate schooling and education; I need to encourage them to study, help them with their homework, follow-up with their grades and their exams, give them opportunities for learning especially during the breaks like summer vacation
 - I need to encourage them to build relationships with others, to cultivate healthy friendships, to love and respect the stranger
 - And the foundation for all of these things is that I teach them the way of the spiritual life - I follow-up with their prayers, with their Bible Readings, I encourage them in the sacramental life - repentance & confession and the Eucharist, I ensure they are attending Vespers and Praises and Liturgy on a weekly basis, I make food that will encourage them to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays and the fasts of the Church. Of course, the Church will support me in the spiritual upbringing of my children, but the Church is not a replacement for my role. I cannot depend on the 2 hours a week of Sunday School, but rather I have to work WITH the Church.
 - Yesterday night, Abouna Reweis told us the story of St Julitta and her son St Kyriakos, and how she taught him from a young age to say "I am Christian" and when it came to his martyrdom, at three years old he proclaimed his faith in the Lord Christ. This is the result of his spiritual upbringing by his mother.
 - Many parents focus so much on the intellectual and education and studying and obtaining degrees and having a good career, but what's the point of a career if he loses his salvation? What's the point of degrees if she doesn't know how to socialize with others or form relationships with others?
 - I have to minister to my child holistically, I am responsible for his or her well being in ALL aspects of their lives
- Even as an individual, I need to see myself holistically and to examine myself in all aspects of my life
 - Let me strive to glorify God in my intellect - education, career
 - Let me strive to glorify God in my body - to keep good hygiene, to stay in shape, to eat healthy, to exercise
 - Let me strive to glorify God in my relationships - to turn away from evil relations, to distance from friends that bring me down, and to get closer to those who raise me up
 - And let me strive in my Spiritual Life - in my fasting, prayers, prostrations, readings, in repentance and confession, in the liturgical life

"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36-37)

The Organized Ministry

We might say - it's difficult to do all of that. How can I, as a parent, focus on all of these things and also I have to work 40 hours a week. It's impossible!

We can take another lesson from the Lord's Ministry here - It is very **organized**. Our God is a God of order and not of chaos.

We start by reading that the Apostles returned from their mission and told Him all that they had done. They reported to them the details of the service He had sent them to do. And then, after the Lord had taught the multitude and healed many, the disciples reported to Him - the people don't have food. Send them away to go and rest and get food. But the Lord said to them "You give them to eat." And He told them to organize them into groups of 50 - and that's how we know the multitude was 5000 men, because they were separated into groups and organized. Then He told them to distribute among them the fish and the loaves. Then He told them to collect the remainder in baskets. The Lord is always organized in His Ministry.

That's why, also we see that the Church services are organized. There are services and people responsible for those services. And there are schedules and timetables. And there are group chats and announcements and emails and systems and websites pickup and drop-off lines. When we are organized in our ministry, taking the example of the Lord, then the ministry can be successful.

Organization is not something that is just administrative or social, but it is something that is spiritual.

The Spiritual Person will be organized in his life. When my time is organized, I will find that I have time for prayer, time for work, time for rest, time for my family, time for myself, time for social life, etc. But if my time is not organized, I will find that I am not successful in my spiritual life. If I am waking up in the morning and it takes me 10 or 15min just to figure out what I'm going to wear - so when will I pray?

I need to be organized, to minister to my soul:

- I wake up at this time, I stand in my room for prayer, I take care of my hygiene, I go to school or work, I have a time for eating, I have a time for rest, I have time for my spiritual canon, I have time for sleeping. If I am organized, I will find time for all of those things - but if I am not, then the first thing that will suffer will be my spiritual life. We have all experienced it, and we have all said it: "I didn't have time" - "I was too busy" - "I was too tired."
- Same thing if I am a parent - I should model the organized life for my children. I should help them to have a daily routine. Wake them up at a certain time, stand and pray WITH them, eat with them, give them chores and things to help around the house.
- Same thing if I am a spouse - I need to be organized so I'm able to spend time with my spouse

"See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." (Ephesians 5:15-16)

The Cooperative Ministry

The fourth lesson that we can take from the Lord's Ministry here is that it is a **Cooperative Ministry**. The successful ministry is the one that is Cooperative between God and Man. There is a human element and a Divine element.

- The human element is what I need to do - what I CAN do.
- The Divine element is what I CANNOT do, and God will do it.

The disciples brought the five loaves and the two fish - this was all they could do. But the Lord took what they had and blessed it and multiplied it and fed a multitude with it. In the reading next week, the disciples will move the stone of Lazarus' tomb, and the Lord will raise him from the dead. The disciples cast the net, and the Lord multiplies the fish.

The same in my own life and ministry:

- I visit someone who is in need - maybe in the visit, I don't do anything or I don't say anything. But the Lord will give them comfort by my presence.
- I encourage someone with my words - the Lord energizes him to keep going
- I teach my children - the Lord will remind them of those lessons at the time when they need it the most
- I set aside time for my spiritual canon - the Lord will multiply my time throughout the day.
- Small gestures of appreciation for my husband or wife - the Lord will multiply peace in my marriage

St Paul says to the Corinthians: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" - we do the easy part, and God does the hard part.

The Lord said to St Paul: "My strength is made perfect in weakness." - we do the weak part, and God does the strong part.

God will never do our part - that would encourage and enable laziness. No! I need to do the parts that I CAN do and the Lord will take care of the rest. I give the 5 loaves and 2 fish, He feeds 5000 men + women and children.

The Abounding Ministry

Finally, what is the result of this ministry? This Ministry that is Impartial, that is Holistic, that is Organized and that is Cooperative with God - the result is an Abounding Ministry. A Ministry that is abundant.

The Gospel ends with the words: "So they all ate and were filled, and twelve baskets of the leftover fragments were taken up by them"

At the beginning of the day, they were hungry and had only 5 loaves and 2 fish. At the end of the day, they are filled and have 12 baskets of remaining fragments. This is abundance.

The result of a successful ministry is abundance:

- When I minister to others, I find myself in an abundance of joy, kindness, goodness, and the other fruit of the Spirit.
- When I minister to the spouse and my children, I will find that my family is abounding in love; my home is abounding in peace
- When I minister to my own soul, I will find that I am abounding in God's grace. That I am growing in virtue. That I am acquiring and living the fruit of the Spirit
- And of course, the abundance is not only here on earth but the Lord promised us treasures in heaven.

King David writes in Psalm 23: "My cup runs over" - abundance. More than I can hold.

Conclusion

May the Lord grant us to examine ourselves and learn from His example in Ministry, to Minister to one another in love, to Minister to our spouse, children, parents, and to Minister to our own soul that He may take our small offering, our weak offering, our easy part - and multiply it for His glory, for the salvation of all.

Glory be to our God. Amen.

2025-07-20: 4th Sunday of Abib - Raising of Lazarus

Introduction

Why did the Lord weep?

In the beginning of the gospel, the Lord said:

"This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

And later he explained it to the disciples:

"Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I might wake him up."

So if the Lord knows that He will perform a miracle, and He knows that Lazarus will live and walk again, then why did the Lord weep?

Of course, the Lord loved Lazarus - but His tears were not simply for His friend's death, but for death itself.

St Cyril of Alexandria says: "The Jews thought that Jesus wept on account of the death of Lazarus, but in fact He wept out of compassion for all humanity, not mourning Lazarus alone but all of humanity, which is subject to death, having justly fallen under so great a penalty."

In the Liturgy, we will hear Abouna say: "And death which entered into the world through the envy of the devil, You have destroyed"

Death entered into the world, through the envy of the devil... What is death? Sin is death.

The Lord is weeping not for his friend's death, but for death itself. For sin. For humanity's fallen nature.

When I am in sin, I am dead. If sin is separation from God, and God is Life, then when I separate myself from Life, I am dead. When I am far from God, I am dead. When I am far from Light, I am in darkness and the shadow of death. But when I repent from the sin, I am raised again to life.

The Lord wept for death and He told His disciples - "Lazarus is dead." God forbid that I hear these words from the mouth of the Lord about myself "Morcous is dead" - God forbid.

Three Resurrections

In the four gospels, the Lord raised three people from the dead. Three miracles of raising the dead performed by the Lord in the gospels:

- The raising of Jairus' daughter
- The raising of the son of the Widow of Nain
- The raising of Lazarus

The Fathers see these three Resurrections as symbolizing our Resurrection from Sin at its various stages.

The Resurrection of Jairus' daughter happened when she had just fallen asleep. She was not even removed from her house yet. It's right after she died, that the Lord came and raised her. This represents the beginning stage of sin.

The Resurrection of the Son of the Widow of Nain happened after he had died, and was taken out of his home and carried in a coffin, but not yet buried. At this time, the Lord came and raised him. This represents the next stage of sin. I am dead, I am on the way to be buried. Sin is growing and it is hiding, as the young man was hidden in the coffin.

The Resurrection of Lazarus happened after he had died, was taken out of his home, carried to a tomb and buried in it, and then left for four days. The Gospel tell us - "there was a stench." At that time, the Lord came and raised him. This represents the last stage of sin - I am dead, buried, and am corrupted to the point that "there is a stench" that everyone around me can smell.

St James also tells us about various stages of sin: "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." (James 1:14-15)

Maybe I am in the beginning stage of sin - I heard about a sin, I am considering doing it, I tried it once. I did it on accident. I was pressured into doing it. I am like Jairus' daughter who was JUST pronounced dead a few minutes ago.

Maybe I am at a further stage - I have repeated the sin more than once, I am hiding it from my Father of Confession. I am like the son of the widow - dead and on the way to be buried.

Maybe I am at an even further stage - I am living the sin, I am not ashamed or embarrassed of it, I am encouraging others to do it or teaching them how. I am like Lazarus - I am dead, buried in the tomb, and there is a stench.

At all three stages, I am dead... I need repentance. And the later the stage, the deeper I am in sin, the more difficult it will be for me to come out of it.

Let's Take some Examples:

Gambling

- My friend told me about an app and I used it and then I found out it's gambling and it's a sin. This is still early stages. Jairus' Daughter
- Well even after I found out that it is gambling and it's a sin, I continued to do it. I made some money, I'm happy with the money! Everyone else is doing it, why not? It's not gambling if you do research, right?! Now sin is at the next level. The son of the widow of Nain.
- Now I'm teaching others how to play. I don't think what I'm doing is wrong... whoever said it was a

sin didn't know about it. Now sin is at the last level - Lazarus.

The same can be said of any sin - lying, cheating, lust, anger, jealousy.

These are stages of sin that the Fathers see in these three dead people - but what unites these three stories, and what makes them miracles, is that the Lord RAISED all of them. He is the Resurrection and the Life, as He told Martha today.

See this icon how we see the Lord trampling on the serpent. The serpent here represents death. As we pray in the Thanksgiving Prayer - "It is You who have given us the authority to trample on serpents, scorpions, and upon all the power of the enemy." So we see who else trampling on the serpent and on death? Jairus' daughter.

No matter what I am struggling with, the Lord is able to raise me out of it. No matter how new it is, how old it is, how deep I am, how much I stand to lose, how much people know or don't know, the Lord can bring me out of it. He can raise me from the death of sin.

Let me ask myself - what is it that I am struggling with? What is it that I am keeping from my Father of Confession? What is it that I can't seem to shake, or that I've become addicted to? The Lord can bring me out of it.

How?

The Lord Seeks Our Repentance

Lazarus was dead in Bethany, but the Lord at the time was beyond the Jordan. But the Scripture tells us that He said to the disciples "Let us go to Judea again." Even though at this point in His Ministry, it was dangerous to go to Judea, the Lord tells them "Let us go to Judea again." He is seeking out Lazarus. He is seeking to raise him from the dead and into life.

Throughout the Holy Scripture, we see the Lord seeking the repentance of those who fall.

- Adam
 - Starting even from Adam... After Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree, the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'
 - Does the Lord not know where Adam is? Of course He does, He is All-Knowing... so why is He asking? He gives Adam a chance to confess. A chance to say "Lord, I made a mistake." - "Lord you gave me one commandment." - "Lord I was weak and I fell and I need You to pick me up."
 - But Adam responds: "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."
 - Does the Lord leave him at that? No, he asks him again - "Who told you that you were naked?" - Confess! - "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" Confess!
 - See how the Lord continues to seek his repentance.
 - And so Adam confesses - The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate. He blames Eve, he blames God, but it's a confession.

- So the Lord moves on to Eve - "What is this you have done?" And Eve confesses right away - "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."
 - The Lord Seeks our Repentance.
 - St Gregory the Theologian in the Divine Liturgy, puts himself in the place of Adam and prays to the Lord, You have created me. You formed me. You laid Your hand upon me. You inscribed in me the Image of Your Authority. You gave me the gift of speech. You opened for me Paradise to enjoy.
 - And then "of one plant have You forbidden me to eat, that of which You have said to me, 'of it only do not eat.'"
 - And St Gregory gives us the confession: "But according to my will, I did eat. I put Your law behind me by my own counsel, and became slothful toward Your commandments. I plucked for myself the sentence of death."
 - There's that word again - death. Sin is death. But the Lord seeks our repentance
- Cain
 - And He didn't just do this with Adam, but in the next chapter with Cain when He asked him "Where is your brother?" and Cain responds "Am I my brother's keeper?"
- King David
 - With King David when He sent to him Nathan the Prophet
 - Nathan told him a story about a rich man and a poor man, and when a traveler came, the rich man took all that the poor man had and gave it to the traveler
 - So King David was enraged! He said that man shall surely die!
 - Nathan told him "You are the man!" - It's you that is in this story because you took all that Uriah the Hittite had
 - And David's response was "I have sinned against the Lord" - and King David in his repentance prayed and chanted and wrote many psalms.
 - This is the answer the Lord is looking for from us - and we can take and use those psalms that King David wrote, like Psalm 50 the Psalm of Repentance.
- Nineveh
 - When the Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh - He was seeking their repentance.
- St Peter
 - With St Peter when He asked him "Simon Bar Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"

The Lord seeks my repentance. Every day that I wake up is a new chance the Lord is giving me for repentance.

The Lord Calls For Me

"Lazarus, come forth!"

Let me put my name in this verse and take it as a message to myself. The Lord is calling for me by name. Am I listening?

The Lord calls for me through the Church:

- Through my Father of Confession - when my Father of Confession gives me advice, or gives me a spiritual canon, or gives me guidance... this is the Lord speaking through him.
- Through my servants - my Sunday School Servants or my Youth Meeting servants. When my servant comes to me and says what you're doing is wrong - it is not pleasing to the Lord, it is not fitting for you as a Christian, you are putting yourself at risk - I take the message as coming from the mouth of God.
- The Lord calls for me through the lessons I hear in Sunday School, or the topics I hear in Youth Meeting. If I am not attending the Youth Meeting, how will I hear His voice and His call for me as a youth?
- The Lord calls for me through the sermons of our fathers the priests in Vespers and in the Liturgy. If I am busy on my phone while Abouna is talking, then I will not hear the Lord's call for me.

The Lord calls for me through His Scriptures:

- The Lord calls for me through my personal readings - when I read the Scripture, and I see myself in place of the Bible Characters, and I see my situations in the Bible stories, and I pray the Lord gives me a personal message, then I will hear Him calling for me.
- The Lord may call for me through the Liturgical Readings - when we read the Pauline, Catholic, Acts, and the Gospel

The Lord may also call out for me through my daily life

- I have the Bible app on my phone and every day it sends a notification to my phone "Daily Bible Verse." I take my finger and swipe right so it can go away - I don't read it, I don't look at it, I just naturally swipe it away. Maybe the Lord is sending me this verse?
- I am scrolling through my Facebook and Instagram - hopefully, if I have social media, then I am following good pages. There are pages that post lives of the saints, that post hymns and liturgies, that post icons, that post verses from the Scripture. And when I see those posts do I keep scrolling? Or do I think to myself - maybe the Lord is sending me a message.

The Lord is calling out for me

The Lord Frees Us

"Loose him and let him go"

Lazarus came out, but he was still in his graveclothes. So the Lord told the people "Loose him and let him go."

It reminds us of when the Lord instituted the sacrament of Confession with the Disciples. He said to them "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:18)

What is binding me? What is preventing me from going to confession? The devil tries to trick us with the Sacrament of Confession. We will hear lies like:

- Abouna is too busy
- Abouna might judge me
- I don't have time
- I haven't confessed in a long time, it's too late
- God can't forgive this
- I'm too embarrassed
- I don't need to confess
- I'm ashamed
- I'm afraid
- I can't stop my bad habits

These are graveclothes that we have to remove so that we can be loosed in the Sacrament of Confession.

If I don't receive the sacrament of Repentance and Confession in its completion, and sit with my Father of Confession, then I will continue to be dead.

And this is why the Church arranges for these readings on the 4th Sunday of Epep. We mentioned last week that this month focuses on the ministry of the Apostles and the Lords support for them. One of the gifts of this ministry is the raising of the dead - the raising of the spiritually dead by the Sacraments.

Today, by Gods grace we celebrated the baptism of a blessed family. This baptism is a participation in the Resurrection of Christ. The removal of the old man and the putting on of Christ. But I cannot go and be baptized every week or after every sin. I have the Sacrament of Repentance of Confession and the Eucharist.

As the Lord said about Lazarus, "Loose him" so He also said to the apostles about us - whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven

Action

So we had three points today in how the Lord raises us from the death of sin:

1. The Lord Seeks our Repentance
2. The Lord Calls for Us
3. The Lord Frees Us

So now let me ask myself - what is it that I am struggling with? What is it that I am keeping from my Father of Confession? What is it that I can't seem to shake, or that I've become addicted to? What is the new sin that I want to make sure it doesn't get worse? What am I holding on to? Let me ask myself these questions, and having faith that the Lord can bring me out of it, let me set an appointment with my Father of Confession.

Maybe it has been a very long time since my last confession. That's okay - the Lord seeks my repentance. The Lord rejoices in my repentance. The Lord is calling for me - all of those messages I've been ignoring, the Gospel Readings, Abouna's sermons, the Sunday School Lessons, the Youth Meeting topics, the Bible verses that come as notifications or come across my feed, - let me take them as messages to repent and confess and receive the Eucharist. And the Lord will set me free.

May the Lord raise us up from the death of sin as He raised Lazarus, and grant us to hear His voice and come forth to the Resurrection of Life.

Glory be to God, forever. Amen.

2026-07-19: 2nd Sunday of Abib - Become As Little Children

Background

The disciples came and asked the Lord "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" and the Lord brought a little child and said "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

It is a BOLD statement! "UNLESS you are converted and become as little children, you will BY NO MEANS enter the kingdom of heaven."

What can this mean?

Actually, it's ironic that we do the opposite! When we are little children, we want to grow up! We don't want to be children anymore! And then when we grow up a little we are upset if someone "treats me like a child!" And then when we have children, we try and hand them off to the grandparents every chance we get! Or we want to go on a trip without the children! And all this time, they have the keys to the kingdom of heaven

So what does the Lord mean to be converted and become as little children? What characteristics of children is He talking about?

"We must recall into the simplicity of children the vices of the body and mind. He has called children all who believe through the faith of listening. For children follow their father, love their mother, do not know how to wish ill on their neighbor, show no concern for wealth, are not proud, do not hate, do not lie, believe what has been said, and hold what they hear as truth. And when we assume this habit and will in all the emotions, we are shown the passageway to the heavens. We must therefore return to the simplicity of children, because with it we shall embrace the beauty of the Lord's humility." (St Hilary of Poitiers)

"Just as this child whose example I show you does not persist in anger, does not long remember injury suffered, is not enamored inordinately by the sight of a beautiful woman, does not think one thing and say another, so you too, unless you have similar innocence and purity of mind, will not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven." (St Jerome)

1 - Purity & Innocence

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Matthew 5:8)

“Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3-4)

- Children are pure - they are shocked by sin.
- They have not normalized evil
 - If they hear a bad word, they are shocked and say "that's a bad word"
 - They, themselves, would NEVER say a bad word
 - We have become used to it in our workplace, our schools, the entertainment we watch, etc.
 - They are honest, would never tell a lie
- Free from vices
 - Pride, jealousy, rivalry, self-glory
 - Don't compare themselves with others
- The Lord is calling us to obtain the purity of children
 - Purity of thoughts
 - Purity of words
 - Purity of heart

2 - Humility

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

“If you love Me, keep My commandments.” (John 14:15)

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5)

- A child knows that he needs help
 - He reaches for his father's hand
 - He asks questions
 - He depends on others
- An adult thinks he can do everything by himself
- Follows his father and mother
 - Believes what has been said to him
 - Holds what he has been taught as truth
- Faith begins this way - by trusting our Heavenly Father and obeying Him. After obedience comes faith.
 - Sometimes we think that obedience comes after faith. Not so with a child.
- The Lord is calling us to obtain the humility of children and to realize that we can do NOTHING without Him

3 - Simplicity

“If your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light.” (Matthew 6:22)

- A child is simple
 - if you give a child a cardboard box, he can play for hours

- If you give an adult a cardboard box, he will spend 8 hours trying to figure out why you gave it to him
- **NOTE:** Here I want to take a sidenote and caution you, because you might be saying "my kids are not innocent, humble or simple!" Unfortunately, in our modern day, our children are losing themselves in devices and screens... Videos that can take away their innocence; access to information that takes away their humility, and imbalances in the brain that take away their simplicity. Take away screens from your children (phones, tablets, computers, TVs) and replace them with playing outside, family time, board games, thinking games and pretend-play. You will be amazed how quickly they rediscover their imagination, creativity and happiness
- For example, if someone who is needy asks for alms, you will find the mom and dad overanalyzing "well what will he use it for? What can we do? I have a \$20 bill I can't break it?" but the child is so simple - "Mommy, Daddy, can we give him something?"
- The Simplicity of children
- They just rejoice! They just enjoy their time! They make the best of it! They smile a lot
 - I was talking with some parents recently and they were sharing something their young children were doing. Every night when it's bed time, the children don't want to go to sleep. So what do they do? They say "we have to pray" and then spend one hour praying! Thank you God for the couch, thank you God for the door, thank you God for the chair and the four legs of the chair and the cushion that's on it... and they are looking around the room trying to find anything else to say thank you God for. And finally when they can't, they start in all the details of their day. Thank you God for my teacher and when she said to me this and that, and when mommy picked me up from school, and when daddy came home... and when they can't find anything else, they conclude... Through the Intercessions of St Mary... Archangel Michael... Archangel Gabriel... Archangel Raphael... Archangel Suriel, and they name every angel and every martyr and every saint they can think of. Simple! Simplicity! Just so they don't go to bed!
 - How many of us would rather go to bed than to pray 5 minutes?
 - We lost our simplicity
 - Instead, we might spend one hour gossiping with a friend. Or one hour replaying an argument in my head and thinking of all the things I SHOULD have said. Or one hour trying to figure out why someone texted me and the text ended with a period.
- The Lord wants us to obtain the simplicity of a child

4 - Courage

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." (2 Timothy 1:7)

"Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10:32)

- A child is courageous and fearless
 - To go pick up a lizard or a snake...
 - Climbing a tree

- Even in their speech, they are courageous to speak the truth. A child doesn't care who he's talking to - if it's his friend, or his parents, or Abouna or the President - they will speak the truth
- Children are not afraid to spread and preach their faith
 - Many of our elementary children have taught their friends at school about Christ dying on the Cross, about Fasting, about praying, about being a deacon, etc.
- Adults are afraid of "political correctness" and "ramifications"
- The Lord wants us to obtain the courage of a child

Conclusion

When we grew up, we lost something. And we aren't the first ones! Even in the time of Christ, 2000 years ago, growing up meant we lost something. The Lord is calling us to regain it. To become like children again, in every aspect of my life.

1. Purity – Relationship with Myself (my senses and my thoughts)
2. Humility – Relationship with God
3. Simplicity – Relationship with Others
4. Courage – Relationship with the World

May the Lord grant to us to be like little children, that we may enter with them into the Kingdom of Heaven.