**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

**St. John Climacus (of The Ladder).**

I sincerely congratulate you all on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent, when we celebrate the memory of our holy, venerable, and God-bearing father, John of the Ladder, who labored greatly to open unto us the mysteries of the spiritual life. The venerable one teaches us that spiritual growth is not the act of a single moment: it is neither possible to gather spiritual strength immediately nor to acquire spiritual wisdom immediately. In order to acquire the gifts of the Spirit, we need to move gradually, from the simple to the complex, as if ascending a ladder reaching from earth to heaven.

During Great Lent we are all given the opportunity to give thought to this ascent, first of all by assessing our own position on this ladder. Where are we? At the beginning, in the middle, or are we perhaps moving towards perfection and can see how much has been accomplished? Or perhaps we are at the very bottom and have not even stepped onto this ladder?

The ascent to God is impossible without strong faith. Today, on the day commemorating John of the Ladder, when the Church invites us to consider the paths of spiritual ascent, that we should hear the Gospel, in which it is said that faith is a necessary precondition for the performance of miracles (cf. Mark 9:17-31). The Lord addresses the father of the unfortunate youth who was afflicted by an evil spirit, Lord said to the father who asked for healing: *If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth* [Mark 9:23] – astonishing words, full of Divine wisdom.

John Chrysostom speaks about this : “Faith is incapable of saving man.” Even faith! God did not desire to save us without our participation, for which reason he requires faith of us. Even faith will not open the gates of Paradise.

Only God can open them, just as when He performed the great miracle of raising from infirmity, through the faith of his parents, the unfortunate deaf man who had collapsed. In reply to the Savior’s words, they had said: *Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief* [Mark 9:24].

So, in response to our faith, in response to our sincere confession of the weakness of this faith, in response to our modest efforts to live by faith, God will perform a miracle for us, too, by opening to us the gates of His Kingdom.

Thus, faith is a necessary precondition for salvation, and not only for salvation, but for eternity as well. Faith gives us a vitality. St. Ephraim said: “Where there is faith, there is strength; but where there is no faith, there is weakness.”

The fourth Sunday of Great Lent draws our attention again and again to the necessity for spiritual ascent. Four weeks of the fast have passed, and everyone can say what has happened to him during this time. Have there been any changes for the better? Have we been able to free ourselves from vices, evil thoughts, and weakness, finding the inner resolve to ascend from strength to strength? Or have these days passed in vanity, in ordinary, earthly, everyday concerns, without any special attention to the spiritual life?

It is no coincidence then that the first and second steps of Saint John’s book are concerned with the renunciation of this life, this world we live in and detachment from all it’s pleasures. We honour Saint John of the Ladder today as a great Saint of our church who reminds us that going to heaven is not as easy as getting into an elevator and pressing a button. On the contrary, it is a long and hazardous climb which is impossible to scale fully unless we beseech God for assistance. May the Lord help us, to find ourselves in the heart of Great Lent, to find the strength to move forward, going from strength to strength on the path to the Kingdom of God. Amen.