

Matthew the Apostle & Evangelist Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13)

Why Phillip's Lent?

Forty days before Christmas, we begin a time of fasting, praying, and works of mercy. It is commonly known as Phillip's Fast, or Lent. We often overlook the significance of this name for the fast and prefer to call it by other names such as "Christmas fast" or Advent. Without embarking on a campaign to promote "Phillip's Fast" as being the correct title, it would be good to look at how this Apostle may give us a way to live this particular time before the feast of the Nativity of Christ that leads to His Theophany.

Phillip is called directly by Jesus; he is one of the first three Apostles. Like Andrew and Peter, he was from one and the same town of Bethsaida. Both Andrew and Phillip are called directly by Christ. All of them are invited by Jesus to "Come and see." Like Andrew, Phillip is a missionary. He does not just enjoy his Apostleship; he goes out and looks for and finds Nathanael and uses the same words of invitation as Jesus: "Come and see."

So the first thing about Phillip's Fast is an invitation to live this call to "Come and see," to draw near to Jesus, and to be with Him where He is. This means for us at St. John's Mission to live in a more sober and attentive way, seeking Him especially among the poor. It is an invitation also to read the Scriptures, which point us to where He is, and help us to recognize Him.

To "Come and see" is also to draw close to the Mother of God, who during this fast holds in her very self, in secret – Mysticos – the Word made flesh. To "Come and see" is also to become aware that He is also mystically – in secret – desiring to be born in us, that each of us is called to become this place where others should be able to "Come and see" Him.

"Come and see" is also a movement of our heart. Enflamed by love, we want to find, reach out to others, and bring them face-to-face with Christ, to "Come and see Him" in this community, in the sharing of bread, and in the shared joy and forgiveness of each day.

"Come and see" is also an invitation to live in us, in our souls, the joy and freshness of these early encounters with Christ that Phillip lived with Andrew and Peter. A renewal of joy and excitement versus a dreary, weary, and cynical holiness.

Phillip is also the one of the Apostles whom Jesus challenges to feed the five thousand hungry people. Phillip's reply is pragmatic. The Gospel shows us a unique familiarity that only Phillip had with Jesus. During Phillip's Fast, Jesus asks us: What will satisfy your hunger? How will you feed my people? What is the bread to be shared at the Mission?



Later in the Gospel, it is to Phillip that some Greeks from Bethsaida go, asking him to help them see Jesus. Again, Phillip was not afraid to show that he belonged to Jesus, and so here he acts as someone who brings people to Jesus. (Judas also uses his status to bring people to Jesus, but to destroy Him and to gain something for himself...?) Phillip shows us what pure love for Jesus looks like.

Like clear water, he brings people to Jesus and steps aside. We tend to want to get something out of our church life. Do we really bring people to Jesus, or do we try to make disciples of others for ourselves, using Jesus as a means?

In the end we see Phillip's intervention at the Last Supper. "Show us the Father!" Phillip asks Jesus. He allows himself to be taught by Jesus. He is humble and asks questions that are clearly not very deep, but because he is humble is led to ask the deepest question that sums up all the Scriptures. Show us the Father.

So, the "Come and see" leads to this "Show us the Father." Phillip traces for us the deep work and meaning of this time before

Christmas. We are going to journey with the Mother of God, and like the shepherds, go to see the one.



pRoberto



"... And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?

... "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"

... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? (Romans 10:15)

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" (Isaiah 52:7 in Romans 10:15).

The homeless brother who came looking for food at the end of the day on Friday was wearing sport shoes and beautiful white woolen socks sewn by hand, on his feet. They surely kept him warm while he was sleeping on the streets at night or walking through the city during the day, even though they looked as if they belonged to a different time and culture. "... Warm but itchy ..." There is a price to be paid.

The food we offered to our brother came from a donation we had received the day before, when a truck had stopped in front of the mission and offered us several trays of food. Some were frozen, others were ready for meals. There were also some very good quality sandwiches. Actually, everything we received was of high

quality. It came from a school, probably an expensive one, judging by the quality of the products brought to us. We asked the donor how he had heard about us. "I saw the place open and people receiving food. I saw them every day while I was driving by. I'll come again next week. I'll bring food from now on."

Our brothers, coming from different life realities, were connected at the mission through food. Both expressed gratitude. One, for being able to bring food to the church. The other for receiving it.

The homeless brother told us more about life on the street. He mentioned how you can get in all kinds of situations, because you trust people or you make the wrong decisions and at the end of the day you are still left alone. "It is lonely out there and harsh. You know, I came at the beginning and just took food to eat outside. After a while I came inside and ate at the table with the people, to experience fellowship. This is a new thing for me, you know... fellowship ... That's something you do not have out there. I want to come more ... And maybe I'll try to volunteer too. I am not ready yet, but I will ..." The poor brothers always preach to us the good news. They don't always wear beautiful white woolen socks on their feet. On the contrary, sometimes their feet are beaten up by all kinds of problems, even missing toes lost during winter. However, there is freshness and beauty in what they confess. There is a light step of the spirit that allows the good news to travel. This week, the good news was about fellowship and eating together. It was about the church, where Jesus eats with the sinners who do not lose hope for their own repentance. It was about the Holy Spirit who takes away the loneliness of the poor man who eats in secret and makes it known to the gathering of sinners where Christ eats with them at the table. And there is food, because there were eyes who saw the door open and people eating together, and ears who listen to the voice that calls him by name, in the intimacy of his own soul, called by name to act and bring more food, so those who come at the end of the day would not leave hungry.

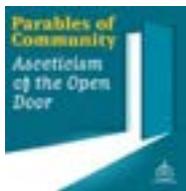
'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'

The icon of mercy that Jesus gives to us today is the lunch or dinner we have with the people at the mission. It might not feel this way all the time, but the gospel is clear today. We all get to receive and share food. It is precisely what God desires. It is the icon of the church where sinners are gathered to partake of the food God prepared for us with love and self giving. It is not the image of mercy of a human heart that prays or eats in secret. The secrecy of prayer is a time of repentance when we realize that our sins keep us from communion with Christ and each other. And we ask for forgiveness and reconciliation, for being reintegrated within the communal body of Christ. We receive mercy when we are gathered together. Because the sinner heard the voice of the Father and followed Him to discover the feast, the gathering where he received food, for the body, for the soul, for the broken life he has been living.

Tax collectors appear several times in the gospel. As a witness of true repentance (Zacheus), of prayer (the publican and the pharisee) or today, as the one who listens when called upon. However, at the time, it might have been the tax collector who had experienced the ultimate alienation. Because he was an outcast within the community and because he dealt with money – evil, that divides, hides with the richness (psalms).

The tax collector is the one who cannot touch the fringe of the garment, like the woman with the issue of blood, because he is completely destitute and naked. He cannot approach Jesus in the crowd because people can see him. Like Zacheus, he can watch only from very far. Today Matthew is alone with his own thoughts and his own sins. Jesus calls him because he could not have approached him on his own. However, the scene is full of hope. The one who is completely lost hears the voice and moves out of the hell in which he has been living. The church, where Jesus eats with the sinners, is always attacked by the voices. It is accused and Jesus is discredited. This discreditation is not superficial. It comes from the voices who have credibility within the community. The voices who pass judgment. And because they accuse and like to listen only to their own voice, they cannot hear their name being called. However, the voice of God is never silenced. Not even by death. It calls the name, and therefore the person approaches. Even in death the church still reads the names of the dead because the Father never stops calling us by name.

The icon of mercy - the gathering of sinners by the table on a given day, has its own difficulties when being written. Sometimes people come in late and the food gets cold. Sometimes people, because of their own pain, cannot sit close to each other. Sometimes, especially these days, we have all kinds of food restrictions or eating disorders and so on. It is because of Christ that we can gather together. During St Philip's fast we are called to keep the fast together by discovering the gift of fellowship, the icon of mercy. And to discover in us more love and understanding for Christ, who keeps us together through those who cannot yet fully approach or offer to volunteer. Those who are just discovering the fellowship as a call in their heart. It is a call which cannot be silenced not even by death but is piercing our alienation today. This call invites us to make room at the table for those who are afraid to approach, for the last sinner, so that we too may be received and become mercy, the gift of communion received with gratitude by our brothers and sisters who eat, not alone, but with Christ.



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St Silouan Chapel at St John's Mission
 155 Broadview Ave. Toronto, ON M4M 2E9
 T: 416-466-1357 E: info@stjohnsmmission.org W: stjohnsmmission.org
St Zoticos Orthodox Church at Good Neighbours Mission
 193 Markham Rd Scarborough, ON M1J 3C3
 T: 647-358-4105



We are an apostolate of the ecumenical patriarchate "Mother Church of Christ's poor" under the Omophorion of Metropolitan Gregory of Nyssa