

My Beloved Ones,

Having celebrated the last of the Twelve Great Feasts of our Church Year with the Dormition, we now look ahead to the renewal of our liturgical cycle, with the start of a New Ecclesiastical Year on September 1.

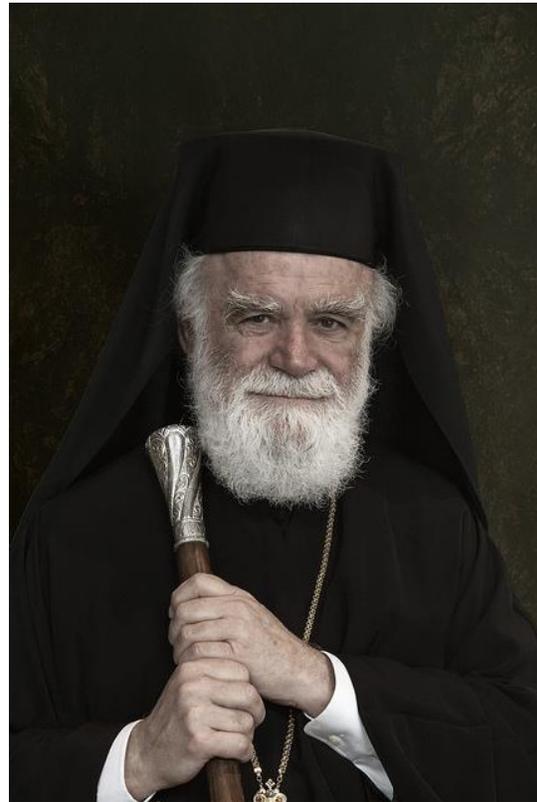
This week's Gospel can be read as a call for us to strengthen our faith for the Church's New Year. St. Matthew writes that shortly after coming down from the mountain where He transfigured Himself in the presence of Peter, James and John, Christ found a crowd waiting for Him.

A man fell at His feet, saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." (Matthew 17:15-16).

Christ is visibly upset with the lack of faith He perceives all around Him: not only from the remaining nine Disciples, but also the boy's father, and those in the crowd—some of whom were surely were full of pride at the failure of His Disciples to heal the young man.

When we know His disappointment at their lack of belief, it is less surprising to read Him say, *"O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." (Matthew 17:17)* Tradition tells us that the Transfiguration took place fifty days before His Crucifixion. Clearly in every step He takes—especially in His meeting with Moses and Elijah on Mt. Tabor—our Lord is aware of His coming Passion, and, in His Humanity, He is grieved. Truly, it is not accidental that in the conclusion of this passage He once more reveals His understanding of His salvific mission to the Disciples: *"As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.'"* (Matthew 17:22-23) However, even in His Human anguish, He is still God: He successfully expels the demon and intends to teach His Disciples the importance of strengthening our faith.

After He miraculously heals the boy, Jesus is privately approached by the Disciples who ask, *"Why could we not cast it out?" (Matthew 17:19).* Jesus is very clear with them: *"Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting."* (Matthew 17:20-21) The images of the tiny mustard seed, against



a large mountain are so great, that many read the end of this passage, secure that they understand we are being instructed to pray and fast more, in order to strengthen are faith—and the reader stops there.

All these things are true: faith, as with any other aspect of our lives, requires exercise and strengthening; and both prayer and fasting are kinds of spiritual “exercising”. Now I ask you: why did our Lord choose a mustard seed for His example?

We know from the Parable earlier in St. Matthew’s Gospel how the mustard seed is used to illustrate that the smallest of things can become great: *“The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed... it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”* (Matthew 13:31-32) However, the choice of a mustard seed to demonstrate the faith needed to move a mountain is not simply because of its size.

For such a terribly small seed, mustard is incredibly hot; to use even a little in a dish changes the taste entirely. Our Lord knows that it is not the “size” of our faith that matters, but the warmth that dwells within our souls. In their doubt both the Disciples and the father of the affected child show that doubt quenches the zeal, the *heat* of faith.

My children, as we prepare to renew our Ecclesiastical Year, the Fathers of our Church have given us this passage to remind us that, just as we begin our secular New Year with practical goals and resolutions, we should also resolve to pray more, fast with greater discernment, study the scriptures, and receive the appropriate sacraments—so that in this New Year we might demonstrate to all how great is our faith in our God, and how our hearts burn for His righteousness.

+ALEXIOS

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