

A HOMILY ON FASTING AND DISPASSION

Spoken at the beginning of the Great Fast by St Theodore the Studite

Brethren and fathers, the season of Lent, when compared to the whole year, may be likened to a storm-free harbour, in which all who are sailing together enjoy a spiritual calm. For the present season is one of salvation not for monks and nuns only, but also for lay people, for great and small, for rulers and ruled, for emperors and priests, for every race and for every age. For cities and villages reduce their hubbub and bustle, while psalmody and hymns, prayers and entreaties take their place, by which our good God is propitiated and so guides our spirits to peace and pardons our offences, if, with a sincere heart, we will only fall down before him with fear and trembling and weep before him, promising improvement for the future. But let the leaders of the churches speak of what is suitable to lay people, for just as those who run in the stadium need the vocal support of their fellow contestants, so fasters need the encouragement of their teachers. But I, since I have been placed at your head, honoured brethren, will also talk to you briefly. Fasting then is a renewal of the soul, for the holy Apostle says, *Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward is being renewed day by day.* And if it is being renewed, clearly it is being made beautiful according to its original beauty; made beautiful in itself it is being drawn lovingly to the one who said, I and the Father *will come and make our dwelling with him.* If then such is the grace of fasting, that it makes us into a dwelling place of God, we must welcome it, brethren, gladly, not grieving at the plainness of the diet, for we know that the Lord, though he is able to nourish lavishly, made a banquet for thousands in the wilderness from bread and water. Also because what is unusual, with enthusiasm becomes acceptable and painless. Fasting is not defined by foods alone, but by every abstinence from evil, as our godly fathers have explained. And so, I beg you, let us abstain from despondency, idleness, sluggishness, jealousy, strife, maliciousness, self-indulgence, self-reliance; let us abstain from destructive desire which the many-shaped serpent lays before us when we are fasting. Let us listen to the one who says, 'The fruit which slew me was beautiful to behold and fair to eat'. And observe: he says beautiful to behold, not beautiful by nature. For just as if someone taking a pomegranate decked out with a scarlet rind should find it rotten, in the same way pleasure feigns untold

sweetness, but when it is plucked it is found more bitter than gall, or rather, than a sharpened two-edged sword which devours the soul it has captured. This is what our forefather Adam suffered when he was tricked by the serpent; for when he touched the forbidden food, he found death instead of life. This too is what all they have suffered who from then until now have been similarly deceived by the dragon. For just as he, who is darkness, *transforms himself into an angel of light*, so he knows how to transform bad into good, bitter into sweet, dark into light, ugly into beautiful, deadly into life-giving; and so the all-evil one does not cease to lead the world astray at every opportunity. But let us at least, brethren, not be led astray by his manifold deceptions, nor suffer the fate of the birds who greedily approach what seems to be food and fall into the hunter's trap. Let us rather look on the outer coverings of evil as dung and when with the mind we have looked on evil in its nakedness we shall flee from it at once. In addition let us welcome the times of psalmody, be enthusiastic for hymnody, attentive to the readings, making prostrations according to the given measure at each hour; *working with our own hands*, because working is good and because one who does not work is not judged worthy of eating. Let us *bear one another's burdens*, for one is weak and another strong, making use of food and drink and the other necessities with moderation, so that there is no provoking to jealousy among evil people, but zeal in goodness. In everything be good to one another, compassionate, reasonable, obedient, full of mercy and good fruits, *and the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and thoughts*. And now, may you be found worthy without condemnation to reach the supreme day of the Resurrection, but in the age to come at the resurrection of the dead to gain the kingdom of heaven in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be the glory and the might, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.