

Letters from Afghanistan: Lent

Fr Dn Anthony

Every Lent brings its own special challenges – perhaps more so for soldiers serving in combat zones. The more obvious challenges generally fall into two categories: those caused by the insurgents (e.g. uncertainly caused by IED, rocket, and direct attacks) and those caused by the general situation (e.g. stress from long hours, being away from home/loved ones, rigors of military life). While these are important, there is another one that is more subtle and, because it is unexpected, more dangerous. This is the challenge of forgetting who (and whose) you are. This is what happened to the Prodigal – he lost himself by conforming his identity to that of the foreign and fallen land.

This is not unique to soldiers. As you know, we can lose ourselves at home in America if we are not careful. Our culture, under the influence of the evil one and millennia of deluded hedonism, is designed to hypnotize us and reorder our priorities. But the Lord, in his love for us, has given us a sure defense against this: the Church. The Holy Mysteries, prayers, and parish life are all designed to reinforce our true identities as children of God and to help us to grow in his likeness. The enemy is not able to employ the same cultural weapons “in theater” as he does back home, but he is busy nonetheless. And the situation is made all the more dire because the sanctuary of the Church seems so far away.

As mentioned above, some of the temptations in theater are subtle. As at home, temptations here often pervert and pass themselves off as virtues. In civilian life, love becomes lust, fasting becomes dieting, rest becomes sloth, and so on. These are also present here, but there are more. For example, duty in war can become bloodlust; honorable service in battle can become murder; and a desire to conquer the insurgents can tempt us to mirror him and his methods. When these lead to action, they can result in horrendous actions – to date we have largely been spared such things. But for Christians, entertaining the thought of evil is a sin because of the way it changes us. The people I work with are unlikely to see battle, but even the process of understanding the insurgents, their ideology, and their tactics is risky as it can lead us to judge/condemn them, demonize them, desire them to suffer, etc. When the insurgents seem to be winning, it can also lead to despondency. All these temptations have one thing in common: they make us forget who we are and pull us away from our true goal.

For soldiers, war is the “foreign country” of the Prodigal. Unlike the Prodigal, soldiers are in this foreign country for good reasons, both personal (e.g. duty) and corporate (e.g. to provide security and development). Despite this, the parallel still holds: if soldiers conform themselves to war, it will destroy them. And the pull of this new (foreign) identity is great. I am not here as a soldier, and I am more aware of the spiritual battle being waged than most. Nonetheless, I have felt this pull myself.

To be honest, the absence of the visible Church left me all but despondent. So much of who I am (or rather who I should be!) is tied to its service. For the first few weeks I struggled greatly – my prayers seemed to just get soaked up into the dust and desolation around me. It was a very difficult time. But it need not have been – this suffering was the result of me conforming myself to a fallen world and forgetting who I am called to be. It took a priest’s visit over Nativity and Theophany – to make me realize that the Church was always there, that I belonged to Christ, and that I remained his servant. Like the loving father, all it took was for me to remember who(se) I was and to turn back to him. That is all it takes for any of us to regain our inheritance.

Since that time, the Church’s presence has been visceral and omnipresent. It has manifested itself through your prayers for me and my family, the wonderful packages parishes have sent us, and the wonderful Orthodox community that has coalesced here. The temptations here are great, but the love of God is greater.

Thank you for your prayers, your words of encouragement, and your support for my family.