

The Meatfare and Cheesefare Sundays

“The Lord is coming and who will not fear Him? Who will be able to appear before His face? O my soul, prepare for this encounter.” (3 Ode of the Matins Canon of the Meatfare Sunday)

The parable of the Prodigal Son, read on the preceding Sunday, portrays in a symbolic way the unfathomable mercy of God who accepts even the greatest sinner that repents and is sorry for his sins. However, to prevent man from sinning boldly and presuming on God's mercy, holy Church in the two succeeding Sundays sets before our eyes two truly dramatic scenes as a warning: the day of the Terrible Judgment and the banishment of our First Parents, Adam and Eve, from paradise. These two staggering scenes depict the justice of God in all its severity. The Gospel of Meatfare Sunday describes the day of the Terrible Judgment, while Cheesefare Sunday laments the expulsion of our First Parents from paradise.

On the Sunday of the Prodigal Son the Church spoke to us, saying: Wayward children, turn away from the path of sin and in all humility and repentance return to the father's house, for our Heavenly Father is infinitely merciful and He will forgive you also. The Sundays of Meatfare and Cheesefare, on the other hand, warn us in threatening tones: The Lord God is not only infinitely merciful, but also infinitely just, therefore, do not toy with sin but fear the severe hand of God's justice and punishment.

The day of Judgment reminds all of us about the strict and comprehensive account we shall all have to render concerning our life. The quick and very severe punishment of God that fell upon our First Parents because of one single grievous sin should convince us that with God there is no playing games. Both Sundays, therefore, point out to us the need of amendment of life, sorrow for sins, fasting and penance, for only in this way can we hope to obtain the mercy of God on the day of the Terrible Judgment.

Meatfare Sunday

What do we mean by "meatfare"?

The week following the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is called Meatfare week and it terminates on the Sunday called Meatfare Sunday. Meatfare Sunday is the last day on which it was still permissible to eat meat before the Great Fast. Meat-fare means "farewell to meat." Hence, the name "meatfare" Sunday. Of course, we are speaking here of the time when the Great Fast was observed in all strictness.

The service of Meatfare Sunday:

The Sunday of Meatfare is also called the Sunday of the Last Judgment. In this day's Gospel Christ speaks of the Last Judgment, of the reward of the righteous, and the eternal punishment of the wicked. The entire service of this day is devoted to the Last Judgment. By recalling the manner in which the Last Judgment will be carried out, this service is designed to fill us with salutary fear, sorrow for our sins, and to stress the importance of good works, especially works of mercy.

No one shall escape this Judgment. All our deeds will be exposed and rewarded or punished. This is clear from the following stichera, taken from the solemn Vespers of that Sunday: "The books will be opened and the acts of men will be revealed before the unbearable judgment seat: the whole vale of sorrow shall echo with the fearful sound of lamentation, as all the sinners, weeping in vain, are sent by your just judgment to everlasting torment. Therefore, we beseech

you, O compassionate and loving Lord: Spare us who sing your praise, for you alone are rich in mercy."

"The trumpets shall blow, the graves shall be opened and all mankind shall rise trembling. Those who have done good shall rejoice with joy, waiting to receive their reward, while those who have done evil shall tremble greatly, moaning and shaking, as they are separated from the elect and sent to suffering. Therefore, O Lord of glory, be compassionate toward us and make us worthy to be counted among those who love You."

Everyone shall appear at the Terrible Judgment where they shall be no respect for persons, as the following hymn of the canon of the Matins service of that Sunday makes clear: "The day is approaching, already at the door is the judgment! O Soul, where kings and princes, the rich and the poor gather, where all people shall be judged and receive according to their deeds." (Ode 4)

Cheesefare Sunday

What is meant by "cheesefare"?

Holy Church in gradually preparing us for the fast, permits us to eat meat for the last time on Meatfare Sunday. During Cheesefare week, however, she permits us to eat only dairy products. Just as we bid farewell to meat on Meatfare Sunday, so too we bid farewell to dairy products on Cheesefare Sunday. Hence, the name Cheesefare Sunday. Our people called this week cheese-or butter-week. This Sunday was the last day for pre-lenten amusements.

In Western Europe our pre-lenten merrymaking was called a "carnival", a word similar in meaning to meatfare. It is derived from the Italian words "carne vale" which literally means "O flesh, farewell!" In the Latin Church, the Great Fast begins on the Wednesday of our First Week of Lent, or Ash Wednesday. On this day, ashes are sprinkled on the heads of the faithful as a sign of penance. In the Latin Church meat may be eaten and merrymaking is permitted until this day. In some places this pre-lenten revelry is very riotous and rowdy.

The practice of Cheesefare week and Cheesefare Sunday is very ancient. It was mentioned by Theophilus, the patriarch of Alexandria (412). However, it is known that even before that time Meatfare week and Meatfare Sunday had already been established. The synaxary of Cheesefare Saturday states that in the opinion of some writers Cheesefare week received the force of law under the Greek Emperor Heraclius (610-641). For six years he had carried on war with the Persian King, Chosroes, without success. Finally, he made a promise that if he won the war, he would abstain from eating meat for a whole week before the Great Fast.

On the Saturday before Cheesefare Sunday, in order to provide us with an example and an incentive for fasting and penance, holy Church celebrates the memory of those men and women who, from earliest times, devoted their lives to prayer, fasting and penance in monasteries or as hermits in the desert.

The liturgical service of Cheesefare week begins more and more to embody the theme of fasting, especially on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. On Tuesday of Cheesefare week during the Vesper service ritual, bows and prostrations are prescribed which are continued throughout the lenten season.

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