"O holy father John, truly you have always carried on your lips the praises of the Lord, and with great wisdom you have studied the words of holy scripture that teach us how to practice the ascetic life. So have you gained the riches of grace, and you have become blessed, overthrowing all the purposes of the ungodly."

Vespers for the Sunday of the Commemoration of Saint John Climacus
The Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast

The Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast
Commemoration of Saint John Climacus

Father Thomas J. Loya

"Hearing the voice of the Gospel of the Lord, O holy father John Climacus,... you have cried out to all: 'Love God, and you shall find eternal grace. Set nothing higher than His love....' "

Vespers for the Fourth Greatfast Sunday: Doxastikon

We are presented at this point in our journey to Pascha with both the very purpose of our greatfast pilgrimage and the way in which we can remain on course. However, it may be easy now to become weary and to loose sight of our desired goal. The vesperal verse cited above speaks about loving God and placing nothing above His love. Our purpose here in this life is to experience God's love and to respond to it. There can be nothing higher, nothing more satisfying than union with our God.

If there be anything that God would want to convey to us, it is precisely how incredibly much He loves us. He knows that once we are truly aware of His love, all other virtues will be realized, all weakness and doubts will be eased.

The saint whom we commemorate on this fourth Sunday of the Holy Fast, our venerable father Saint John Climacus likened the practice of the virtues in the light of God's love to a great spiritual ladder, the rungs of which bring us ever closer to the one thing that we desire the most: divinization, becoming like God and being united with Him forever.

Yet, it seems at times as though our spirits are imprisoned in our bodies and our earthliness shackles us from our divine ascent. For this we need to engage ourselves fully in Christian asceticism. This does not mean that we must hate the body or the things of this earth. Rather it implies that by stripping away the excess layers of selfishness which blind our vision, we see the things of this earth and our own flesh as imbued with the presence of God.

Our vision is clearer through the eye of the contemplative who sees things as they really are with true value and meaning. Things are perceived not merely as items for consumption, but they are seen as somehow manifesting the glory of God. The contemplative sees God not as One Who has rejected earthliness, but rather as One Who has become incarnate and Who therefore deified our nature. John Climacus prayed and fasted because he had a vision of holiness, a sense of unity with God.

Our asceticism will likewise be blessed and fruitful during this greatfast season only if it be rooted in the realization that God has so loved us. Like John Climacus, we must construct our own ladder of divine ascent, for this is the only pathway to inner peace whereby we can arrive at that place of genuine love we so desperately desire.

SCRIPTURE READINGS: Hebrews 6:13-20
Mark 9:17-31