

Are Your Hearts Hardened?

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On December 13th we read Mark 8: 11-21, in which the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask Him for a sign from heaven. Their aim, as it is so often, is to test Him..

Considering all that Jesus has already done—healings, miracles, loving acts toward all kinds of people—it's a curious request that the Pharisees are making. They certainly are aware of these things He has done, and also of the miraculous feeding of several thousand people, described in the verses just before these.

Mark uses some striking words to describe Jesus' reaction to their questioning. He says that the Lord "sighed deeply in His spirit." It profoundly grieved Him to encounter the obstinate refusal of some people to acknowledge Him, because it was a rejection of His love and of His desire to give them salvation.

In the Old Testament we have, long before the Incarnation of Christ, an example of God's interest in those who grieve over the sins of others. God asks His servant to "go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed there" (Ezekiel 9:4). Centuries later, in the letter Saint Paul writes to the Romans, he expresses a similar grief. He writes that because of the unbelief of the people of Israel, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (Romans 9:2).

The Pharisees were not the only ones who grieved the heart of Jesus. In the passage from Mark, the disciples are in a boat with Him, and discover that they have forgotten to bring bread, and now they have only one loaf. They go on talking about this, even as He tries to warn them about other, serious things. He urges them to remember how He provided bread for the crowds, and then asks, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?"

Jesus Himself is the Living Bread that the disciples need, but they are too preoccupied with fretting about their "bread problem" to understand. The Pharisees have seen many signs, but they want more, or a different kind. They are too preoccupied with their expectations to understand.

What about us? Will we demand some "sign" that specifically suits our expectations, and waver in our belief in Him if we don't get that very specific sign? Will we forget the wonder of having a God who feeds us and is present with us, as we fret about the needs of our daily life?

He asks, "Are your hearts hardened?" How good for us if we can offer Him not hardened hearts but soft ones, "broken and contrite" ones that grieve over our sins and the sins of others, and are open to His healing love.

