

*Where shall I begin to lament the deeds of my wretched life?
What first fruits shall I offer, O Christ, for my present lamentation?
But in Thy compassion grant me release from my falls.
Come, my wretched soul,
and with your flesh confess to the Creator of all.
In future refrain from your former brutishness,
and offer to God tears in repentance.*

Thus begins our familiar text read before our eyes in a familiar custom of our Orthodox life. As Lent begins each year, its initial days are marked out by two defining features or characteristics. The first, the increased focus on the Psalter, which will remain constant throughout the entirety of the forty days; and the second, the words of St. Andrew and the Great Canon, which punctuate the evenings of the first four days of the Fast and then return in their full form in the fifth week.



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There is something unique, something astonishing about this text. However many times we have heard it or read it before, each time it is encountered, each time its words, together with the special melodies that we sing, with the bows, the demeanor with which we experience them—each time, they effect us in a remarkable way. We sense rightly, that in this text, which is not outwardly markedly different from the hundreds of other canons in our heritage which we recite every single day of the year, we are nevertheless encountering something unique. We are called into a reality that extends far beyond ourselves. From the opening words sung by the choir to a special melody we realize that what is coming is something extraordinary. I'm sure you remember those words:

"*A Helper and Protector...*", the choir sings,
He has become my salvation.
This is my God, and I will glorify Him.
The God of my fathers is He and I will exalt Him,
for gloriously has He been glorified.
(The first Irmos of the canon.)

My God.

My father's God.

My Helper, my Protector, my Salvation.

It is not likely that a liturgical text makes such sweeping pronouncements about its contents—more or less an entire confession of the God of our history, from our beginnings to our ends; from creation to redemption, from death into life. A text that evokes the whole *ekonomia* of salvation in such poignant terms, only to culminate in its penultimate petition with the strange cry:

Do not require of me fruits worthy of repentance,
for my strength is spent in me.
|Grant me ever a contrite heart in spiritual poverty
that I may offer these gifts to Thee
as an acceptable sacrifice, O my only Savior.

How remarkable! How beautiful! That in a text that begins with the charge to examine life, for the soul to make an accounting of herself, for a life to lean into the task of real repentance—that this text should conclude in this way: seeking at the outset to make a first-fruit offering, and then at the conclusion discovering that the only acceptable sacrifice—brokenness, spiritual poverty, can be offered by the heart and genuinely brought to its Creator.

The Great Canon of St. Andrew truly is a remarkable hymn. While, as I've mentioned already, in structure it is not dissimilar from hundreds of others, it is altogether unique. It addresses themes that are absent from no liturgical or theological text: repentance, redemption, humility, Divine Mercy; and yet it somehow touches on them in a way that affects us with unparalleled power. Whence this strength? Whence this unique character? And, why its central place in our Lenten life?

Rather than simply commenting on various spiritual themes in the Canon, I would like to look a little more deeply at just what it is and how it works while we have a little time together here, an approach borne of a personal conviction on my part that the Great Canon teaches us—or ought to teach us—far more about our Orthodox life than we often give it credit for, even though we may love it very dearly.

If we carefully examine the Great Canon not simply as a document, but in the whole context of the Holy Church's delivering of this text to us, and delivering us to this text, we see in it a guidepost for the very nature of our ascetical life, of our approach to the Holy Scriptures, and of the necessary work of our life of repentance.



Let me start with a brief word about the text proper and its author—a necessity, if we are really to understand this Canon rightly. It was, as is well known, written in the first half of the eighth century by St. Andrew of Crete. Born in Damascus, the future hymnographer was, perhaps by divine irony, but certainly as a form of prophecy, mute until the age of seven. At that time he was healed through the reception of Holy Communion, and the experience stirred a zeal in the young boy's heart, in the life and the love of his Lord who had given him his tongue, and in the Holy Scriptures by which he saw Him revealed to him. Some seven years later at the age of just fourteen, he travelled to Jerusalem and became a monk at the Lavra of St. Savva the Sanctified.

Though the patriarchal throne in Jerusalem was vacant at the time, the *locum tenens*, Theodore, saw the young monk's potential and piety; indeed, he became very well known to all for his abstemiousness, his chastity, his humility, and his doctrinal acumen. And he made monk Andrew the Patriarchal Archdeacon there in the city of the Lord's Incarnate Sacrifice. In this function St. Andrew attended the Sixth Ecumenical Council, which took place in the years 680 and 681, and he was there in an official capacity as a member of a group of Representatives of the Patriarch of Jerusalem. There it was said of St. Andrew that, and I quote from his life, "the St. contended against heretical teachings, relying on his profound knowledge of Orthodox doctrine." He was likely only in his twenties. Later, following the conclusion of the Council with others in the Imperial City having recognized his skills, he was transferred from Jerusalem to Constantinople permanently, and he became the Archdeacon of Hagia Sophia, amongst the highest clerical offices in the whole of the Orthodox world, putting him at the side of emperors and patriarchs on a daily basis. But, in due course, even this exalted archdiaconal rank was not sufficient in the eyes of his superiors for the pious father Andrew, and under the reign of Emperor Justinian II he was appointed to the Metropolitanate of Gortyna in Crete, by which title we continue to remember him today.

Something particularly relevant for our understanding of the Canon however, but without which we cannot understand the Canon, took place in the year 712. A "robber council" was held, in which the decrees of the Sixth Ecumenical Council—where again, St. Andrew had been present in an official

capacity—the decrees of the Council and the Council as a whole were rejected, the Devil attempting to strike a blow against the Church’s confession of truth in the face of the heresy of Monothelitism.

St. Andrew, for reasons that we do not fully understand, took part in this robber council, accepted it and endorsed its heretical rejections of Constantinople III. What stirred St. Andrew to this rebellion against the Faith we simply do not know; he was not the only bishop to do so. What we do know is that the following year, in 713, he came to himself, he repented of his error, and was received back into the fullness of Orthodoxy.

From this point his life begins to be marked out by an excess of composition, chiefly of hymns, and alongside other significant names such as St. John of Damascus, [and] St. Germanos of Constantinople, St Andrew is generally given credit for inventing the particular form of a hymn known as a “canon”, with which we are also familiar today, a transformation of the far older practice of simply singing the Biblical Odes at Matins into a series of reflections interjected as hymns between the verses of those Odes, which, as we know, eventually would come to replace the Odes altogether except during Lent. And it's during the same period, of course, that he composes the most famous of all his works, our Great Canon.

St. Andrew wrote perhaps twenty-four canons in total, but there is none quite like this particular composition. We have to remember that great tragedy of his life. Only a few years before—we don't know the exact year of his death—but it's possible he died as early as 726, which would mean he had fewer than fourteen years of life between his betrayal of God and the Faith and the Church at the robber council, and his subsequent repentance, and ultimately his repose. And it is in *this* context—of a man who had ascended from the sorry lot of a mute child to the highest offices of Imperial Orthodoxy; from the status of an unknown to the pastor of thousands of souls, who had nevertheless denied his Savior in the most vile of ways, yet had been rescued from his error by that same God and called back to His service—that St. Andrew pens the Great Canon.

That is to say, his Canon of Repentance was not a theoretical work of a writer trying to explore themes that he felt were important for dogmatic or principled reasons.

The Great Canon is a cry of an anguished heart. St. Andrew had been lifted up by God far beyond anything he could have deserved or expected and still he had rejected Him. He had received grace upon grace, and then he had spurned the Giver of grace. And then, in an act of redemption over which St. Andrew clearly spent the rest of his life in utter awe, the same Lord he had rejected and spurned received him back. I do not think it's too dramatic to say that this experience radically altered St. Andrew's life, his thought, and his spiritual vision. Clearly he knew the teachings of the Church very well, and for very many years. One does not become an official representative at a Council, much less a Metropolitan Archbishop, without knowing the dogmas of the Faith. He knew, or he thought he knew about the reality of sin, of rebellion, repentance, redemption—of course, he did. And yet in his experience of betrayal—of *his* betrayal of his Lord—everything changed for St. Andrew.

He no longer knew about sin in terms of observation or intellectual comprehension. He knew it first and foremost and forever after by the drama of his fall. He no longer needed to intellectualize what it meant to feel the dung pit of the Prodigal—he had cast himself into the dung of apostasy; he could taste that mud in his teeth. He no longer needed to hypothesize about the weeping of the soul, and the peril of the self-abandonment of God—those tears he had wept *himself*. He had felt that darkness and he had felt, too, the unexpected mercy of God's love.

St. Andrew no longer needed to speculate about how a soul must feel standing before the Just Judgment with nothing to offer in its defense. He had tasted and experienced a foretaste of that judgment, and he had been able to offer nothing apart from his repentance, and with that the Lord had picked him up.

It was that tragedy that altered St. Andrew's heart. Out of a dogmatist, it created a hymnographer; out of a career cleric, a witness; not just a preacher, but a *witness* of repentance. But that tragedy and its resolution led to another great tragedy in St. Andrew's life, one that he appears to have even less understood, one he could not explain. In the face of all the grace that his soul had experienced, of all that he had concretely and experientially come to know, the inexplicable happened within him: his soul seemed to forget. He did not forget, not intellectually, not historically, but that was precisely what tormented St. Andrew. He could remember his fall; he could remember the Lord's mercy, and yet deep within him, in the inner recesses of his heart, his soul seemed not to remember to repent, to carry on with a life of repentance. He could tell himself to do so, but his soul didn't seem to listen.

Seeing this in reference to Biblical lives (a trait that I'll come back to in a moment), St. Andrew realized that while others repented and were forever altered in the depths of their soul, he did not. To put this in his own words:

*Running through all who lived before the Law, my soul,
you have not been like Seth,
nor have you imitated Enos nor Enoch,
nor Noah, but you are seen to be bereft of the life of the righteous.*

Or in comparing the cleansing of the soul following God's mercy to the eradication of the memories of Egypt amongst those led by God out of that bondage into the new land, St. Andrew would sing:

*You, wretched soul,
have not struck and killed your Egyptian minds like the real Moses.
Say then, how will you dwell in that desert solitude,
where the passions desert you through repentance?*

And so, the Great Canon is composed in response to this new tragedy in St. Andrew's heart. He has learned what repentance means; what it has to mean. And as he feels his soul numbed by insensitivity, by a lack of perception, by a dismissal of memory, he calls her back to what is truly needful. It's been said that the approximately two hundred and fifty troparia of this Canon—the numeration varies a little bit in different manuscripts—that they were composed as a personal reflection on the part of St. Andrew, but I've always found this to be a little misleading. The hymn is composed out of St. Andrew's spiritual necessity: He needed to stir his soul back to life, and with it surely, the souls of his flock whom he knew must suffer similarly. And if such a return to life did not become his soul he knew very well what hell awaited him. So he crafted this dialogue between himself and his soul with God watching on, that before his time ran out, he might come to himself again in the depth of his heart.

*"Brief is my lifetime," he cries out in the Great Canon,
and full of pain and wickedness,
but accept me in penitence
and call me back to the awareness of Thee.*

The Great Canon is, above all else, a cry—the cry of a heart that speaks to every heart. A cry to finish the course, before the world finishes us. A cry to see the world and ourselves as they really are, and not to remain stagnant anymore.

In essence, the Church has deemed the Canon an appropriate text for two phases of our Lenten repentance: its initiation, and the push towards its conclusion. By it we enter into the spirit of the Fast during Pure Week, and in the fifth week we tie it to the reading of the life of St. Mary of Egypt, linking her example of a repentance that endures to the end to this example of what repentance must truly be.

And, the Church not only prescribes *when* we shall encounter the Great Canon, but *how*. It is recited in our tradition as a *kliros* text; that is to say, it is not proclaimed from the *Ambon*, the way we proclaim regular homilies. It is read from the *kliros*, though by tradition we move the *kliros* into the middle of the temple.

If we take a moment to stand back and examine this layout, this structure, this unique arrangement, we see the Church has presented the repentant spirit of the Great Canon as a kind of connecting link between the life of one of her greatest ascetics, the Apostolic witness of Christ's redemptive work, and the Savior's own proclamation of the blessedness of His Kingdom. St. Mary's life can seem stark, *barren*, to one who reads it without wisdom; but linked to the Canon, we are able to see, as it were, into her heart, and find the spiritual realities anything *but* barren, that led her into her desert repentance. The longed-for redemption of the Canon is tied to the testimony of the Holy Apostles that God sent not His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it, and when the Canon itself

All of this goes to show that this text, in the Church's mind, is not simply to be *read*, or even *heard*. It is to be *encountered*. We are called to *experience* it. We are called to experience the grief and heartache of the recognition of our lack of repentance, hence the liturgical setting, the ascetical acts of prostration. Not to experience these things emotionally, or emotively, but *dispassionately*, taking stock of our lives as they really are, but only within the embrace of the Church's abiding confidence in the mercy of Him Who, as the holy Evangelist says, takes away the sin of the world.

In this spirit, in this context, St. Andrew is given rein to speak to us. But, ironically, this is not what he seems to wish, and it is certainly not the way his hymn works. It doesn't speak to us at all—it aims to speak *for* us, or perhaps even that is slightly inaccurate—its deepest aim is to draw us into its spirit, *so that its words become our own words*.

Just as the prayers contained in the prayer book are meant to teach us the way a heart should cry to God in daily prayer, to instruct us in the kind of words that our own hearts should issue forth, so the Great Canon speaks within us as we ought to speak. It gives us, as if on a kind of loan, the words that would emerge from within each of our hearts, if only we would take seriously what repentance really means, but which we so often do not find brimming from our lips, deadened to the spiritual reality by our laxity, and our worldliness, and our distraction.

Thus, the Church seems to say: the Great Canon is written and read in the first person, not simply for St. Andrew, but for all of us.

“Where shall I begin to lament?” we sing.

“I am the one who by my thoughts fell among robbers.”

“I am the coin with the Royal image which was lost of old.”

“The alabaster jar of my tears, O Savior, I pour out on Thy head as perfume.”

I want to dwell on this first-person reality for just a moment, since all attentive Orthodox Christians know that this is a regular feature of our Divine Services. Though, yes, we do often speak historically of the past, in our hymns very regularly, we find our liturgical experience is set into the first person.

*I see the crucifixion of Christ
and what's more I see it today.
I behold the empty tomb.
I witness the resurrection.*

And thus, in the Great Canon, I sing to my soul, through the word spoken by the priest; St. Andrew's own words. And while this is always a powerful element in our prayer, it is perhaps nowhere more so than in this hymn, for it is precisely this that gives the Great Canon that tangible sense of potency that I mentioned at the outset, because I am given to sense, if only for a few minutes of my attentive participation, something that I long for, something that my heart and soul deeply crave. Though I may not live a life of worthy repentance, nevertheless, something within me longs to, cries out to, and by being drawn into this hymn of experience, for a moment I am given to taste firsthand of the glories of that repentant life that I so often neglect on my own.

In this worldly life, people will often expend great energy, time and money to have first-hand tastes of things that they might do in full if they could. Men will climb false walls to experience a taste of the thrill of scaling hundred-meter cliffs; they will pay to go into wind chambers to experience a taste of the freefall of a skydive they may never make. They will go into flight simulators to taste the experience of flying a jet over the clouds.

But far deeper than these worldly longings, are the needful desires of the soul. And the soul longs to live in real repentance, to truly experience Divine Mercy, and for a few moments this Great Canon permits the soul of that experience.

She tastes, for a time she can touch, the blissful reality of genuine, heartfelt, deepest repentance, and that flavor deeply changes her. It's for this reason that the Great Canon, though filled with so much dismal and discouraging imagery, has the effect of leaving those who experience it in the divine services filled, not with dread or darkness, but with a sense of lightness, even of dispassionate joy. We touch for a time on realities that we fail to truly seek in our own lives, and the fact that we *can* taste them, that we *can* experience them, infuses the soul with a new zeal and the desire to make a real beginning in the spiritual life.



St. Andrew of Crete

In this context, St. Andrew is a resource, and provides us with access to an enormous series of critical observations and points on our necessarily ascetical life as Orthodox Christians. Our vision must change if we are to take hold of the reins of repentance, and that change must be made *by force*, as the Lord Himself said is the trait of those who inherit His Kingdom; that wrestling, that forceful change of mind, heart and life must convert our soul to see certain realities to which we are normally blind.

I have time today to dwell only on a few, so I'll select three of the ascetical themes in the Great Canon that I feel are of the most significance to us. First and foremost is St. Andrew's consistent conviction that *my sin is greater than any other's* and by their lesser sins, I see my greater ones. This is summed up by St. Andrew's words in Ode Three:

*I alone have sinned against Thee,
and I have sinned above all men
O Christ my Savior, spurn me not.*

But a few troparia later:

*There is no one who has sinned among men
whom I have not surpassed by myself.*

Or in the Fourth Ode, even more poignantly:

*There has never been a sin or act or vice in life
that I have not committed, O Savior.
I have sinned in mind, word,
in choice, in purpose, will and action
as no one else has ever done.*

It should be said that there are many people who have a problem with this kind of language. Some consider this degree of self-deprecation to be excessive. “Have I really gone about and slaughtered towns the way some of the old historical figures did?” “Have I really committed murder?” “Do I really have blood on my hands?” “Am I really worse than Cain?”

But St. Andrew teaches us that unless we are able to see that even the greatest of sinners demonstrate the shadows of virtues that we do not ourselves possess, unless we are genuinely to place ourselves below them, and see in their vile acts, not the other, but the unadmitted and the unacknowledged realities of what is scandalously familiar to us, we will never be able to learn from them what matters for our redemption.

Here is a typical example in St. Andrew's own words, from the Seventh Ode:

*“David once joined sin to sin,” he writes,
for he mixed adultery with murder.
Yet he immediately offered a double repentance.
But you, O my soul,
have done things more wicked than he
without repenting to God.*

Again some ask, “Have I really committed murder and adultery?”

Perhaps not in the manner that King David did. But the Savior has taught us deeper meanings to both sins, “for whoever hates his brother is a murderer,” He says, “and whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Let us not see only fleshly outward things and use them as excuses to deny the spiritual sin within us. I may not have killed, but that does not mean I am not a murderer. I may not have committed marital infidelity, but this does not mean I am not an adulterer.

And yet St. Andrew's point is not simply to force us to acknowledge that we have done grievous things, even more grievous than King David, but to help us see the deeper tragedy within us, that *he genuinely repented* of his sins... *while I have not*. The great king made two mistakes, grievous! And yet, he altered the whole of his life in response. Yet I pile sin upon sin, spiritual, and far more serious than his. And what does my barren soul do? It makes excuses. It pretends it was justified. It downplays its wrong-doing and does everything in its power to explain it away.

Again and again, this theme is repeated in the Great Canon. Just one more example will be enough:

*“Having emulated Uzziah in my soul,” he says:
You have his leprosy in you doubled,
for you think disgusting thoughts
and do outrageous things.
Let go of what you are holding, my soul,
and run to repentance.*

This leads St. Andrew to pen what is one of his most startling and significant verses. I'm sure you have noticed it before; it comes from the Ninth Ode of the Great Canon:

*Christ became man
and called to repentance robbers and harlots.
Repent, O my soul!
The door to the Kingdom is already open
and the transformed Pharisees, publicans, and adulterers
are entering into it ahead of you.*

For all that we may claim—piety or virtue, faithfulness or strictness, here we behold the reality that those whom the world might say, or in our debased pride *we* might be tempted to say, those who are far worse than us—these very ones are entering the Kingdom of God *ahead of us*. We spend so much time during the Great Fast focusing on these very categories, these types of people—the Pharisees, the publicans, the grievous sinners.

“Let us flee from the proud speaking of the Pharisee,” we say on the Sunday dedicated to him and the Publican, “let us hate the boastful words of the Pharisee.”

And yet for all that, we see in the image of the Pharisee that we are meant to avoid, here is the real truth of the matter: that such ones are entering into the Kingdom, while I am not. For they ultimately repent, while I stay stalwart in my sin, or deadened to real repentance. This is the first ascetical theme that I would wish to draw out of the Canon.

The second is that the sin in my life, for all of its weight and enslaving force, is *not* to be identified with my real humanity, with my created being. The despondency that too often follows upon the realization of sin, especially when that realization comes through purely secular or heterodox means—this despondency comes in large part with the confusion of the conflation of my sin with my nature. This is amongst the greatest sorrows of Western thought: that sin starts to be seen as a constituent part of our fallen nature, in which it cannot be separated from *who I am*, and thus *who I am* becomes a bleak dismal thing. What hope can there be of transformation, if the very nature of what I am, is *sinner*, and *sinful*—what purpose to the ascetic life at all?

The Great Canon, in concert with the Holy Fathers before and after, speaks, as we might expect, in entirely different terms. One of its earliest metaphors for our sinful condition is that of *nakedness*.

*“I have lost my first-created beauty,” St. Andrew sings,
and comeliness,
and I now lie naked and I am ashamed.*

My nature is *naked*. The manner in which it ought to be clothed—holiness, incorruption, sanctity, has been cast aside, that the image of God’s very being is no longer so visible in me. But what is *lost* is *not* destroyed: it is *cast away*; it is *buried*. He sings again in the Second Ode:

*I have buried with passions
the beauty of the original image, O Savior,
but seek now and find it,
as you found the lost coin.*

This is *essential*. This is what brings us hope in our ascetical life, because what is buried *can be dug up*, just as a man who is naked can be clothed. His nakedness is not an alteration of his being, it is a condition of his existence.

And this is precisely how the Church teaches us to understand our sin. It fundamentally alters *how* we exist. Naked, we become frail, susceptible to the winds and the snow, and the rains—icons of something other than perfect holiness. We suffer. We die. But there is always hope to be clothed again to unbury the pristine image. In this light, St. Andrew speaks of sin as a kind of new clothing, wretched in its nature. Rather than the virtuous clothing of piety, we have chosen instead to cover our self in garments of shame.

“I am wrapped in a garment of shame as with fig leaves,” he writes, *“in reproof of my selfish passions.”* Or, a little later, *“I am clad in a coat that is spotted and shamefully blood-stained by the flow of my passionate and pleasure-loving life.”*

The result of such new clothing is that we are burdened by it; weighed down by it.

“All the demon chiefs,” he says, *of the passions
have ploughed my back
and long has their tyranny over me lasted.
I have fallen under the burden of the passions
and the corruption of matter,
and from then until now
I am oppressed by the enemy.*

These observations lead into the third critical ascetical point in the Great Canon: that the life of repentance must be a life of action. And this is driven by the seriousness with which St. Andrew sees sin, and that unflinching sureness, surety! That sin can be forgiven, and that our dark lives can be made bright again.

Modern emotionalism has led to the emotionalization of both sin and repentance. “Sin is what makes me feel bad, and repentance is a change of feeling or thinking so that I will think differently. I’ll be sorry, I’ll pledge myself to think and feel in a new way.”

If St. Andrew speaks about *emotion* or *feeling* in the Great Canon, it is only with regard to engendering that necessary pinprick of compunction in the heart, that stirs it to life; to cause the sorrow or grief to spur us into action.

But, it is on precisely that, the *action* of repentance, that he dwells without cessation. Stagnancy kills repentance. Those who stand idle, or worse, look backwards, are not repenting—they are *dying*.

“Do not be a pillar of salt, my soul,” the Canon sings,
by turning back,
but let the example of the Sodomites frighten you,
and take up refuge in Zoar.

This image is repeated many times. With it the focus on real asceticism as a *race*, something that is to be *run*.

“Run, my soul!” St. Andrew says,
Run like Lot from the fires of sin.
Run from Sodom and Gomorrah;
Run from the flame of every irrational desire.

This is another among the many reasons that the Church has chosen the Canon to be so central to our liturgical life during Great Lent, because it does not talk about repentance merely emotionally, or theoretically. Its fundamental command to each of us is that our repentance must be *active*. It must be the work of a life lived differently, of a race run faithfully without tiring; of an asceticism that is fired by the conviction that the harsh clothing of sin *can* be cast off; that the discarded garments of grace *can* be restored; and that the beast of the passions hunched over our backs *can* be slaughtered by the power of the Holy Trinity, and that God's image may be renewed in us.

The Canon's asceticism is thus profoundly hopeful. And this is why we hear the words and feel joy in our hearts, because for all that it observes the tragedy of our condition, its abiding message is that *we can change* and we can become glorious again.

Before I draw to a close, I want to say just a few words about the Great Canon as a witness to the Orthodox approach to the Holy Scriptures. This text is, after all, as we've already seen in numerous ways from the quotations that I have given, remarkably scriptural, having earned the nickname “a survey of the Old and New Testaments”—a nickname that is almost spelled out by St. Andrew himself. He cries out,

I have reviewed Moses' account of the creation of the world, my soul,
and thus all the canonical Scriptures.

(By “canonical Scriptures,” he, like most of the Fathers, refers to the Old Testament)

and now I am bringing before you
examples from the new scriptures...

(That is to say the New Testament)

...to lead you into compunction.

But what I'd like to point out just briefly, is that what is of supreme value in the Canon in this regard is not simply that it quotes the Scriptures at almost every verse, but rather that it demonstrates the pinnacle of our Orthodox understanding of how the Holy Scriptures are to be interpreted by a pious heart.

In the Great Canon of St. Andrew we encounter Scripture, not *studied*, but *appropriated*. This, in our Orthodox life, is the *highest* form of encounter with the Holy Scriptures—when they cease to be something studied, and instead are transformed—not by intellectual endeavor, but by a deep interior ascesis into the cry of our own hearts. The story of the Scriptures is, in the mystical way, the story of *my life*.

David repents, to show me repentance. The command to clear the Promised Land of the Canaanite tribes is a command for my ascesis, to clear the promised land of my heart from every sin and passion. The parting of the Red Sea is the path of *my* salvation, demonstrating how and by what means, namely Holy Baptism, I should be let out of bondage and into the fullness of life. And so I look at their story and I see my own. Abel, Cain, Noah, Uzziah, Lamech, David, Solomon, even Pharaoh—they are all *me*. Their stories are *mine*—at least in part—and again, this is not because they are mere metaphors or, God forbid the thought!—simply non-historical allegories. They are real people. But the One Body of Christ extends across the whole of History, and I gradually learn that my life is tied together with theirs, and theirs reveals mine. I can learn from their mistakes, because their mistakes are alive in my heart, and I can learn from their repentance, because that, too, is available to me, if only I would rise up and seize it.

I would like to end by once again looking at the opening Irmos of the Canon that I quoted at our beginning:

*God is my Helper and my Protector,
He has become my salvation.
This is my God and I will glorify him,
my father's God,
and I will exalt him,
for gloriously hath he been glorified.*

God's truest glory is thus man's sweetest hope. What he seeks and what we seek, or ought to seek—these are the *same*. The shepherd's greatest joy is in finding his lost sheep, and the wayward sheep's truest sweetness is again beholding the face and hearing the voice of its master. St. Andrew reminds us of precisely this.

*Thou art the Good Shepherd.
Seek me, Thy lamb,
and neglect me not who have gone astray.
Thou art my sweet Jesus.
Thou art my Creator,
in Thee, O Savior, shall I be justified.*

My dear Brothers and sisters! The race of repentance is not over; it is happening now. It will happen until the day of your death and you must run it well, broken in heart, yet joyful in spirit, for at the end of this race is that image that was lost, the glory that was shunned, and the gates of the Kingdom that have already been opened to repentant sinners and which may yet be opened unto us.