

The Festal Letter of St. Athanasius

Letter 1

Come, my beloved, the season calls us to keep the feast. Again, the Sun of Righteousness Malachi 4:2, causing His divine beams to rise upon us, proclaims beforehand the time of the feast, in which, obeying Him, we ought to celebrate it, lest when the time has passed by, gladness likewise may pass us by. For discerning the time is one of the duties most urgent on us, for the practice of virtue; so that the blessed Paul, when instructing his disciple, teaches him to observe the time, saying, 'Stand (ready) in season, and out of season'— that knowing both the one and the other, he might do things befitting the season, and avoid the blame of unseasonableness. For thus the God of all, after the manner of wise Solomon, distributes everything in time and season, to the end that, in due time, the salvation of men should be everywhere spread abroad. Thus the 'Wisdom of God 1 Corinthians 1:24,' our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, not out of season, but in season, 'passed upon holy souls, fashioning the friends of God and the prophets Wisdom 7:27;' so that although very many were praying for Him, and saying, 'O that the salvation of God had come out of Sion!'— the Spouse also, as it is written in the Song of Songs, was praying and saying, 'O that You were my sister's son, that sucked the breasts of my mother Song of Songs 8:1!' that You were like the children of men, and would take upon You human passions for our sake!— nevertheless, the God of all, the Maker of times and seasons, Who knows our affairs better than we do, while, as a good physician, He exhorts to obedience in season — the only one in which we may be healed — so also does He send Him not unseasonably, but seasonably, saying, 'In an acceptable time have I heard You, and in the day of salvation I have helped You Isaiah 49:8.'

And, on this account, the blessed Paul, urging us to note this season, wrote, saying, 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation 2 Corinthians 6:2.' At set seasons also He called the children of Israel to the Levitical feasts by Moses, saying, 'Three times in a year you shall keep a feast to Me Exodus 23:14' (one of which, my beloved, is that now at hand), the trumpets of the priests sounding and urging its observance; as the holy Psalmist commanded, saying, 'Blow with the trumpet in the new moon, on the [solemn] day of your feast.' Since this sentence enjoins upon us to blow both on the new moons, and on the solemn days, He has made a solemn day of that in which the light of the moon is perfected in the full, which was then a type, as is this of the trumpets. At one time, as has been said, they called to the feasts: at another time to fasting and to war. And this was not done without solemnity, nor by chance, but this sound of the trumpets was appointed, so that every man should come to that which was proclaimed. And this ought to be learned not merely from me, but from the divine Scriptures, when God was revealed to Moses, and said, as it is written in the book of Numbers; 'And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, Make to you two trumpets; of silver shall you make them, and they shall be for you to call the congregation Numbers 10:1-2;'— very properly for those who here love Him. So that we may know that these things had reference to the time of Moses— yea, were to be observed so long as the shadow lasted, the whole being appointed for use, 'till the time of reformation Hebrews 9:10.' 'For' (said He) 'if you shall go out to battle in your land against your enemies that rise up against you Numbers 10:9' (for such things as these

refer to the land, and no further), 'then you shall proclaim with the trumpets, and shall be remembered before the Lord, and be delivered from your enemies.' Not only in wars did they blow the trumpet, but under the law, there was a festal trumpet also. Hear him again, going on to say, 'And in the day of your gladness, and in your feasts, and your new moons, you shall blow with the trumpets.' And let no man think it a light and contemptible matter, if he hears the law command respecting trumpets; it is a wonderful and fearful thing. For beyond any other voice or instrument, the trumpet is awakening and terrible; so, Israel received instruction by these means, because he was then but a child. But in order that the proclamation should not be thought merely human, being superhuman, its sounds resembled those which were uttered when they trembled before the mount Exodus 19:16; and they were reminded of the law that was then given them and kept it.

For the law was admirable, and the shadow was excellent, otherwise, it would not have wrought fear, and induced reverence in those who heard; especially in those who at that time not only heard but saw these things. Now these things were typical and done as in a shadow. But let us pass on to the meaning, and henceforth leaving the figure at a distance, come to the truth, and look upon the priestly trumpets of our Savior, which cry out, and call us, at one time to war, as the blessed Paul says; 'We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities, with powers, with the rulers of this dark world, with wicked spirits in heaven Ephesians 6:12.' At another time the call is made to virginity, and self-denial, and conjugal harmony, saying, to virgins, the things of virgins; and to those who love the way of abstinence, the things of abstinence; and to those who are married, the things of an honorable marriage; thus, assigning to each its own virtues and an honorable recompense. Sometimes the call is made to fasting, and sometimes to a feast. Hear again the same [Apostle] blowing the trumpet, and proclaiming, 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed; therefore, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness.' If you would listen to a trumpet much greater than all these, hear our Savior saying; 'In that last and great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink John 7:37.' For it became the Savior not simply to call us to a feast, but to 'the great feast.' if only we will be prepared to hear, and to conform to the proclamation of every trumpet

For since, as I before said, there are various proclamations, listen, as in a figure, to the prophet blowing the trumpet; and further, having turned to the truth, be ready for the announcement of the trumpet, for he says, 'Blow the trumpet in Sion: sanctify a fast Joel 2:15.' This is a warning trumpet, and commands with great earnestness, that when we fast, we should hallow the fast. For not all those who call upon God, hallow God, since there are some who defile Him; yet not Him — that is impossible — but their own mind concerning Him; for He is holy, and has pleasure in the saints. And therefore, the blessed Paul accuses those who dishonor God; 'Transgressors of the law dishonor God Romans 2:23.' So then, to make a separation from those who pollute the fast, he says here, 'sanctify a fast.' For many, crowding to the fast, pollute themselves in the thoughts of their hearts, sometimes by doing evil against their brethren, sometimes by daring to defraud. And, to mention nothing else, there are many who exalt themselves above their neighbors, thereby causing great mischief. For the boast of fasting did no good to the Pharisee, although he fasted twice in the week Luke 18:12, only because he exalted

himself against the publican. In the same manner the Word blamed the children of Israel on account of such a fast as this, exhorting them by Isaiah the Prophet, and saying, 'This is not the fast and the day that I have chosen, that a man should humble his soul; not even if you should bow down your neck like a hook, and should spread sackcloth and ashes under you; neither thus shall you call the fast acceptable Isaiah 58:5.' That we may be able to show what kind of persons we should be when we fast, and of what character the fast should be, listen again to God commanding Moses, and saying, as it is written in Leviticus, 'And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, In the tenth day of this seventh month, there shall be a day of atonement; a convocation, and a holy day shall it be to you; and you shall humble your souls, and offer whole burnt-offerings unto the Lord.' And afterwards, that the law might be defined on this point, He proceeds to say; 'Every soul that shall not humble itself, shall be cut off from the people.'

Behold, my brethren, how much a fast can do, and in what manner the law commands us to fast. It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul. Now the soul is humbled when it does not follow wicked opinions, but feeds on becoming virtues. For virtues and vices are the food of the soul, and it can eat either of these two meats, and incline to either of the two, according to its own will. If it is bent toward virtue, it will be nourished by virtues, by righteousness, by temperance, by meekness, by fortitude, as Paul says; 'Being nourished by the word of truth 1 Timothy 4:6.' Such was the case with our Lord, who said, 'My meat is to do the will of My Father which is in heaven John 4:34.' But if it is not thus with the soul, and it inclines downwards, it is then nourished by nothing but sin. For thus the Holy Ghost, describing sinners and their food, referred to the devil when He said, 'I have given him to be meat to the people of Ethiopia.' For this is the food of sinners. And as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, being heavenly bread, is the food of the saints, according to this; 'Unless you eat My flesh and drink My blood John 6:53;' so is the devil the food of the impure, and of those who do nothing which is of the light but work the deeds of darkness. Therefore, in order to withdraw and turn them from vices, He commands them to be nourished with the food of virtue; namely, humbleness of mind, lowliness to endure humiliations, the acknowledgment of God. For not only does such a fast as this obtain pardon for souls, but being kept holy, it prepares the saints, and raises them above the earth.

And indeed, that which I am about to say is wonderful, yea it is of those things which are very miraculous; yet not far from the truth, as you may be able to learn from the sacred writings. That great man Moses, when fasting, conversed with God, and received the law. The great and holy Elijah, when fasting, was thought worthy of divine visions, and at last was taken up like Him who ascended into heaven. And Daniel, when fasting, although a very young man, was entrusted with the mystery, and he alone understood the secret things of the king and was thought worthy of divine visions. But because the length of the fast of these men was wonderful, and the days prolonged, let no man lightly fall into unbelief; but rather let him believe and know, that the contemplation of God, and the word which is from Him, suffice to nourish those who hear, and stand to them in place of all food. For the angels are no otherwise sustained than by beholding at all times the face of the Father, and of the Savior who is in heaven. And thus Moses, as long as he talked with God, fasted indeed bodily, but was nourished by divine words. When he descended among men, and God had gone up from him, he suffered hunger like other men. For it

is not said that he fasted longer than forty days — those in which he was conversing with God. And, generally, each one of the saints has been thought worthy of similar transcendent nourishment.

Wherefore, my beloved, having our souls nourished with divine food, with the Word, and according to the will of God, and fasting bodily in things external, let us keep this great and saving feast as becomes us. Even the ignorant Jews received this divine food, through the type, when they ate a lamb in the Passover. But not understanding the type, even to this day they eat the lamb, erring in that they are without the city and the truth. As long as Judea and the city existed, there were a type, and a lamb, and a shadow, since the law thus commanded : These things shall not be done in another city; but in the land of Judea, and in no place without [the land of Judea]. And besides this, the law commanded them to offer whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices, there being no other altar than that in Jerusalem. For on this account, in that city alone was there an altar and temple built, and in no other city were they permitted to perform these rites, so that when that city should come to an end, then those things that were figurative might also be done away.

Now observe; that city, since the coming of our Savior, has had an end, and all the land of the Jews has been laid waste; so that from the testimony of these things (and we need no further proof, being assured by our own eyes of the fact) there must, of necessity, be an end of the shadow. And not from me should these things be learned, but the sacred voice of the prophet foretold, crying; 'Behold upon the mountains the feet of Him that brings good tidings, and publishes peace Nahum 1:15;' and what is the message he published, but that which he goes on to say to them, 'Keep your feasts, O Judah; pay to the Lord your vows. For they shall no more go to that which is old; it is finished; it is taken away: He is gone up who breathed upon the face, and delivered you from affliction.' Now who is he that went up? A man may say to the Jews, in order that even the boast of the shadow may be done away; neither is it an idle thing to listen to the expression, 'It is finished; he is gone up who breathed.' For nothing was finished before he went up who breathed. But as soon as he went up, it was finished. Who was he then, O Jews, as I said before? If Moses, the assertion would be false; for the people were not yet come to the land in which alone they were commanded to perform these rites. But if Samuel, or any other of the prophets, even in that case there would be a perversion of the truth; for hitherto these things were done in Judea, and the city was standing. For it was necessary that while that stood, these things should be performed. So that it was none of these, my beloved, who went up. But if you would hear the true matter, and be kept from Jewish fables, behold our Savior who went up, and 'breathed upon the face, and said to His disciples, Receive the Holy Ghost John 20:22.' For as soon as these things were done, everything was finished, for the altar was broken, and the veil of the temple was rent; and although the city was not yet laid waste, the abomination was ready to sit in the midst of the temple, and the city and those ancient ordinances to receive their final consummation.

Since then we have passed beyond that time of shadows, and no longer perform rites under it, but have turned, as it were, unto the Lord; 'for the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty 2 Corinthians 3:17;'— as we hear the sacred trumpet, no

longer slaying a material lamb, but that true Lamb that was slain, even our Lord Jesus Christ; 'Who was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and was dumb as a lamb before her shearers Isaiah 53:7;' being purified by His precious blood, which speaks better things than that of Abel, having our feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel, holding in our hands the rod and staff of the Lord, by which that saint was comforted, who said , 'Your rod and Your staff they comfort me;' and to sum up, being in all respects prepared, and careful for nothing, because, as the blessed Paul says, 'The Lord is at hand Philippians 4:5;' and as our Savior says, 'In an hour when we think not, the Lord comes — Let us keep the Feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Putting off the old man and his deeds, let us put on the new man , which is created in God,' in humbleness of mind, and a pure conscience; in meditation of the law by night and by day. And casting away all hypocrisy and fraud, putting far from us all pride and deceit, let us take upon us love towards God and towards our neighbor, that being new [creatures], and receiving the new wine, even the Holy Spirit, we may properly keep the feast, even the month of these new [fruits].

We begin the holy fast on the fifth day of Pharmuthi (March 31), and adding to it according to the number of those six holy and great days, which are the symbol of the creation of this world, let us rest and cease (from fasting) on the tenth day of the same Pharmuthi (April 5), on the holy sabbath of the week. And when the first day of the holy week dawns and rises upon us, on the eleventh day of the same month (April 6), from which again we count all the seven weeks one by one, let us keep feast on the holy day of Pentecost — on that which was at one time to the Jews, typically, the feast of weeks, in which they granted forgiveness and settlement of debts; and indeed that day was one of deliverance in every respect. Let us keep the feast on the first day of the great week, as a symbol of the world to come, in which we here receive a pledge that we shall have everlasting life hereafter. Then having passed hence, we shall keep a perfect feast with Christ, while we cry out and say, like the saints, 'I will pass to the place of the wondrous tabernacle, to the house of God; with the voice of gladness and thanksgiving, the shouting of those who rejoice ;' whence pain and sorrow and sighing have fled, and upon our heads gladness and joy shall have come to us! May we be judged worthy to be partakers in these things.

Let us remember the poor, and not forget kindness to strangers; above all, let us love God with all our soul, and might, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. So may we receive those things which the eye has not seen, nor the ear heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man, which God has prepared for those that love Him , through His only Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; through Whom, to the Father alone, by the Holy Ghost, be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Salute one another with a kiss. All the brethren who are with me salute you.