

September 27, 2018

Sermon for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

+ By Thy Precious Cross O Saviour, save us!

“But God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified to me and I to the world.” -Galatians 6:14

As we all know, we live in a consumer driven society. The consumer mentality dominates every aspect of our life, economic, political, and even religious. There is no part of our life that is free from this mentality. We demand choices and we all want the very best choice—not just for ourselves but for our children and those we care about. We have come to believe (or should I say, we have been conditioned to believe) that having all the options and choosing the best is what makes us free and happy. Not only the rich believe this but the poor also. We all believe that we have the right to demand the very best. In fact we insist on it. We insist on it being offered to us without any effort of our own, without any struggle or discomfort. We even become angry if we think we are being deprived of the best.

How does this mentality survive in a so-called “Christian” country like ours? What happens when this mentality comes up against the Cross of Christ? One way it survives is by recreating a form of Christianity without the Cross. Our consumer mentality is simply transferred over to the spiritual life. We have the right to salvation and heaven without any effort on our part. The so called “Prosperity Gospel” form of Christianity is an example of this.

Wikipedia defines the “Prosperity Gospel” thus: “A religious belief among some Christians, who hold that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one’s material wealth. Prosperity theology views the Bible as a contract between God and humans: if humans have faith in God, He will deliver security and prosperity.”

In this way of thinking, God really doesn't want us to struggle or be humbled; rather He wants to give us a successful and prosperous life as a sign of His special favor for us, a sign that we have been chosen to live a care-free life. This aberrant form of Christianity is understandably very popular in the United States, with many well-known TV evangelists and mega-churches. It fits in perfectly with our consumer mentality. And while we Orthodox openly reject this type of Christianity, unfortunately we ourselves are not free of it. This way of thinking seems to have settled not only into our country, but into our way of life and even worked its heretical way into our hearts.

But Christ didn't become incarnate so that we could live a comfortable life free of all illness and be a financial success. Christ didn't come so that we could live a painless life. Christ didn't carry His cross so that we would never have to carry a cross. Rather, Christ came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. But not the life of financial success and pain free existence where we have all the pleasures we want and the very best of material things. Real life, the authentic life that Christ has taught us and lived Himself, is made very clear in the Gospel: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). Where is the false promise of wealth and good health here?

The Precious Cross of Christ is a paradox:

It is precisely in dying to ourselves that we are reborn.

It is through dying to ourselves that we find our true self, made in the image and likeness of God.

It is through dying to ourselves that we are finally able to love God and others.

It is through dying to ourselves that we finally find peace and true joy.

It is through dying to ourselves that we are no longer obsessed with ourselves!

By accepting the cross we no longer fear suffering or death. By dying to ourselves, carrying our cross, and following Christ, we can become one with Him.

The story is told of St. Ambrose of Milan and his deacon as they were traveling a long distance. They stopped to rest at the home of a pious farmer. The farmer and his wife were very pleased to see their holy bishop St. Ambrose and prepared a great feast for him. As the meal progressed and all the servants were waiting on the guests, St. Ambrose asked the farmer, "How is your health?" And the farmer said "Excellent, no illnesses." "And how is your wife," the bishop asked. "She's in excellent health also." "And how are your children?" "They are all well," he said, "and very intelligent." Then St. Ambrose asked, "And how is your farm doing?" "Oh, excellent," the farmer said, "I've had a bountiful harvest and am building new barns to hold all the crops." At that point St. Ambrose stood up and said to his deacon, "Come, we must leave this place, God doesn't dwell here."

The Cross is not just the symbol of Christianity, it is the essence of Christianity. Every Orthodox Christian wears a cross around his neck and would never be without his cross. There is an old Russian saying, when someone misbehaves: "he acts like he doesn't have a cross." Every Orthodox Church has not just one but many crosses on its domes and towers, proclaiming the triumph of the cross and scattering the demons. The mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ is what real Christianity is all about. It is precisely through the cross that we find Christ. It is impossible to follow Christ without carrying the cross—impossible.

In St. Mark's Gospel we hear the story of the young man who came running after Christ and knelt before Him asking, "Good master, what must I do to gain eternal life?" And Jesus beholding him, loved him, and said unto him, "One thing you lack: go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up your cross and follow me." And he was sad at this word and went away sorrowful because he had many possessions.

St. Isaac says, that "the Cross is the door to mystery." The mystery that he speaks of is the mystery of theosis, the mystery of our salvation. The paradox of death giving life! But dying to oneself isn't

some horrible event. Our Saviour says: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25) . From a practical point of view, to die to ourselves means that we don't have to be preoccupied with ourselves anymore. We no longer have to try to get our way all the time or try to get people to notice how smart we are or how good looking we are. We no longer have to insert ourself in other's conversations or give our "expert" opinion on the subject of the day. We can be free from constantly seeking pleasure and comfort. We can be free from needing the approval of others. As we die to ourselves the "new man", made in the image and likeness of God, can emerge and grow. As all the selfishness and self-centeredness dies away, as we pick up our cross without complaining, more room is made for Christ, for His love and for love of others. We can finally put God and our neighbor first.

The Cross that lays on the anoly here in the middle of our church all decorated with basil leaves is not only the precious Cross of Christ but it is also the cross that each one of us must carry. How sweet this burden is when it is united to Christ but how heavy it is when it is carried alone.

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