

## **Homily on the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Father Filip Lommaert**

**Sunday, September 19, 2021**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. One God.  
Amen.

Some among us will have noticed that today's Gospel reading of Saint Mark has a familiar ring to it. And they are right. Today's Gospel reading is the same as the reading on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Great Lent when at the end of the Divine Liturgy we have the service of the Adoration of the Cross.

On Tuesday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, we celebrated the Universal Exaltation (Elevation) of the Precious and Lifegiving Cross.

The Holy Equal of the Apostles Emperor Constantine, having gained victory over his enemies in three wars with God's assistance, had seen in the heavens the Sign of the Cross, and written beneath: "By this you shall conquer."

Ardently desiring to find the Cross on which our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, Saint Constantine sent his mother, the pious Empress Helen (May 21), to Jerusalem, providing her with a letter to Saint Macarius, Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Although the holy empress Helen was already in her declining years, she set about completing the task with enthusiasm. The empress gave orders to destroy the pagan temple and the statues in Jerusalem.

Saint Helen took a part of the Life-Creating Wood and nails with her to Constantinople. The Holy Emperor Constantine gave orders to build in Jerusalem a majestic and spacious church in honour of the Resurrection of Christ, also including under its roof the Life-Giving Tomb of the Lord and Golgotha.

It took around ten years to construct the temple. Saint Helen died in 327, and never saw the temple dedicated. The church was consecrated on September 13, 335. On the following day, September 14, the festal celebration of the Exaltation of the Venerable and Life-Creating Cross was established.

Now, in the period of the Afterfeast of the Exaltation of the Cross, we come face to face with the paradox of our salvation: the terrible and horrible instrument that was used to kill Christ has become the means of His victory over sin and death. The cross is, in the theology of the Church, “the trophy invincible, the weapon of peace” because by it we gain eternal peace.

Today, we wear our crosses around our necks and display them in our churches, homes, and some schools. This was not always the case. During the first century, the cross was one of the cruelest instruments of execution used by the Romans. It was used to serve as a statement: all who were condemned to crucifixion would die long, painful, and shameful deaths. The cross was the means of the Romans to strike fear in the hearts of would-be traitors and rebels. No one at that time, honoured the cross in any way, and certainly no one thought that God’s Messiah would die on a cross.

This instrument of Roman torture and violence, on which Christ was nailed, has become the all-powerful symbol and witness of the healing from sin and the downfall of death. But today, in particular, we must go beyond recognising what Christ has accomplished for the universe and consider what He has accomplished for us and how we’re responding to His call. So, we have to ask ourselves, “What does the power of the cross mean for us today?”

For too many of us, it seems to have lost all its power. Oh yes, we still wear crosses around our neck, but it seems somehow to have lost its real meaning. Some wear it out of habit or custom, or family tradition. And then there are those who wear it as a fashion accessory.

Why? Because we have stopped thinking about what that cross really means to us. We are far too busy with our personal lives in the modern world. We only seem to concentrate on wanting to increase our material wealth and wanting it now. Most people nowadays seem to only follow this one line from I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 32: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow, we die!” (I Cor. 15:32). There is no place in their lives for God.

Even for those who try and live a sound Christian life, temptation is never far away and we cannot escape the material world around us. It is easier to enjoy an easy life, indulge in modern comforts and overindulgence. We are seduced into thinking that the solution to all our problems is to earn as much money as we can, to aim for more financial security and that to ease our busy life schedules and modern-day stress we need to focus more on ourselves and our own self-indulgence.

Well, have I got news for you! Christ’s words should make you think otherwise when he asks: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul?”

Very regularly, we hear or read in the media that somebody has committed suicide, or has become an alcoholic or drug addict. As we continue to read we find out that these people often had all the material things they could wish for, and were often very well off.

This should make alarm bells ring. That is why we need the cross. The cross is a reminder of selflessness and the greatest love that ever was – that willing, voluntary gift of Christ Himself, His self-sacrifice for the salvation of the world: the ultimate example of God’s love for mankind.

We need to let go of our fixation on the material world and ourselves, and instead give ourselves over to a life in Christ, a life where we love God as He loves us.

That is why Christ asks us today “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

Those Christians who choose to lead a life dedicated to love and serve God, and to learn how to live in the light of His truth, those who learn to overcome the passions, even if it is a very slow and at times very painful process, they can become the glorified and adopted children of God which He created us to be.

Today we also commemorate Saint Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the Patron of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland. Here is a man who definitely choose to lead a life dedicated to love and serve God.

Saint Theodore was the eighth Archbishop of Canterbury (668-690), and one of England’s great saints. He was a Greek from Tarsus, the home of Saint Paul. He was a highly-educated monk living in Rome who was quickly advanced through all the clerical ranks and consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury at the age of sixty-five.

Saint Theodore arrived in Kent in 669, when he was almost seventy. In spite of his age, he was quite energetic, travelling throughout England founding churches and consecrating bishops to fill those Sees which were left vacant by an outbreak of plague. He also created new Sees and established a school in Canterbury where Greek was taught.

Saint Theodore summoned a council of the entire English Church at Hertford in 672. Not only was this the first church council in England, but it was also the first assembly of any kind attended by representatives from all over the country. In 679 he convened another synod at Hatfield to maintain the purity of Orthodox doctrine and to condemn the heresy of Monothelitism.

Saint Theodore fell asleep in the Lord in 690, and his body remained incorrupt for a long time. Under his leadership, the English Church became united in a way that the various tribal kingdoms did not. The diocesan structures which he established continue to serve as the basis for church administration in England. He was respected for his administrative skills, and also for his moral and canonical decisions.

Returning to today's Gospel reading: "what is it that we really must do?"  
What we must do is give up our relentless pursuit of worldly things.

This might sound crazy, especially in our consumer-oriented society. In I Cor. 1:18, St. Paul reminds us: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God".

In other words, what Christ God is sharing with us today is indeed life-saving, because only by following His way are we able to follow Christ, find healing from our passions, and become fellow victors with Christ over sin and death.

And that way is the cross. In order to share in the joy of His resurrection, of His victory over death, we must first participate in the struggle, the pain, and the sacrifice of crucifixion. This does not mean that we should now all go home, sell our possessions and give away all our money to the poor and needy.

It does not mean that we should put ourselves in a situation where we can seek martyrdom. Neither must we try and convince ourselves that all our problems are the result of someone being unfair to us because of our faith.

Instead, we need to die to our sinful desires and actions and we must crucify the habits of thought, word, and deed that lead us to worship and serve ourselves instead of God and fellow man. We must end our obsession with hating our enemies, judging others, getting our way, living only for ourselves, and satisfying every self-centered desire.

What we need to do is take heed of the words of Saint Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." In other words, by dying to his sins, Paul became a living icon of the Lord. Our Saviour's glorification of humanity was made present in Paul's life. He became truly himself in the divine image and likeness by sharing in the Lord's death and resurrection.

Amen.