

20th September 2020
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**Sunday after the Exaltation
of the Cross**

How many times must I tell you! It is an expression that we use all the time. We can be warned again and again, but we can take no notice. We might, of course, be sceptical: the alarm might sound, but be a false one; we might procrastinate: thinking we have all the time in the world. But there again, we might well take in the message, but are too afraid to face the reality.

Three times in St Mark's gospel Jesus warns his disciples that He is going up to Jerusalem to His passion. Three times, in chapters eight, nine and ten, the cost of their discipleship is pointed out to them, and three times they obfuscate; they try to avoid the issue, bringing in irrelevancies to distract Jesus from His mission.

After the feeding of the four thousand, when Jesus tells them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected, Simon Peter takes Him aside privately and rebukes Him. Such a thing is unconscionable; it surely cannot happen. *'Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.'* Such is Our Lord's reply, and this *after* Peter's confession of faith, and Christ saying that his Church will be built upon this confession of faith.

Soon after His transfiguration, He teaches His disciples once again that He will be betrayed, and after He is killed, that He will rise again. Yet even after hearing this promise of triumph over the passion, His disciples, as they make their way to Capernaum, start a debate among themselves as to who among them will be greatest in the coming kingdom of God. I believe the psychologists called that kind of thing *displacement activity*. He shames their pride, you will recall, placing a small child before them and saying that here is greatness in the kingdom.

And yet again, as they journey towards Jerusalem, He tells them in stark detail what is going to happen to Him there. How quickly the human mind can forget what it has been taught. Or is it that the disciples imagine suffering must always be avoided; that it serves no purpose where God is concerned. Clearly, James and John had not got the message yet, for they go up to Jesus and ask to be rewarded with the best seats, to the right and left of him, when He enters into His glory. He responds, of course, only to say that they too *will* drink from the same cup of suffering and, eventually, receive the same baptism that awaits Him in Jerusalem. Immediately, self-righteous indignation breaks out among the other disciples, as they recall Jesus' rebuke to them all about greatness in the Kingdom of God, whilst they were on the road to Capernaum. But He tells them that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. Incidentally, there is a spiritual lesson here for us: that those who have sinned in a particular way, but have once repented, have no place condemning those who fall into the same sin. One who serves in humility sees only his own sins.

Being aware of all this, today, the Sunday after the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the gospel invites us too, to make the journey to Jerusalem. Not the earthly city, the holy city, although it is a pious and salutary thing to make the pilgrimage there. I mean that today Christ calls us to follow Him on the only road into the Kingdom. Yes, in Orthodox Christianity we are uncompromising when it comes to our salvation. All the other roads, no matter what they promise are blocked, or lead off in other directions; they are blind alleys and dead ends. Whether they offer you wealth and prosperity, well-being and health, public esteem and moral superiority; oneness with nature and peaceful harmony, reincarnation or the workers seizing control of the means of production: whatever it is, there is no salvation there for the soul.

I am the way and the truth and the life, Christ tells us in St John's gospel. And to be on that *Way* is to do precisely what He tells us today in the gospel, '*Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*' The great question is posed in those very first words: *whoever desires to come after Me.* Yes, like in Shakespeare's Hamlet, that is the question! The prince of Denmark was wrestling with his inner conflicts and the thought of oblivion to end them. But Christ asks us, *what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?* That was the danger for Hamlet, but we are of those who have that very desire, who have elected to follow after Him: '*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.*'

At some point in our Christianity each of us might sit down and consider this. I do not mean just once; I do not mean only during some intense experience of conversion, but even daily: when we get out of bed each morning, we are to deny ourselves and take up the cross? And there is a whole forest of crosses out there, and one of them has your name on it. Whatever it be: persecutions, poverty, disabilities, illnesses, broken relationships, disasters, dangers, isolation, and habitual sin; they are all there, awaiting us. But He asks us to accept our cross, even joyfully, because if we have the faith to accept it - and yes, it does take faith - you have to believe this: it is through the cross, through our dying daily, that we are alive in Christ.

I am well aware that all kinds of people come here, all sorts and conditions of men, from the absolutely committed to the new enquirer after Orthodox Christianity. We also have a number of catechumens, preparing to be received, who have, in the words of St Basil's Liturgy, bowed the neck before the Lord to receive the easy yoke. Church communities will always be a series of concentric circles, with those at the very centre, and those further out towards the periphery, for the quality and quantity of faith, of commitment and of involvement, varies. The

important fact is that we are here, gathered together in and around Christ.

I have no time for the idea that you can be Christian but not belong to the Church; that you have no need to be part of all this. What will such a one say in their defence at the Last Judgement? That they followed the Christian way by their own efforts alone; that they reformed their morals by their own will power; that they faced the difficulties and problems of life through their own courage. Presumably, they had no need of grace, of the fellowship of the saints, of the wise counsel of spiritual fathers; finally, no need of God. It is, of course, the old Palagian heresy ultimately to believe that we have to save ourselves without the grace of God.

I loved what has been posted on our parish Facebook page recently, advising that, no matter what we are caught up with, no matter what sins we have fallen into, *go to church anyway*. The Church is a hospital for the broken, lost, empty, confused, desperate and rejected. The grace of God found in the Church is awesome, *dreadful*, to use an old Anglo-Saxon word. For the Church is the House of God, the gate of heaven, as Jacob the patriarch prefigured, when he spent the night at Bethel and dreamed of the ladder reaching heaven. Here it is then, that in venerating the cross of Christ, our own cross is blessed for the journey to Jerusalem.

On 2nd of July 1863, during the famous battle of Gettysburg, the extreme left of the Union forces' line was held by Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of the 20th Maine regiment; they were the end of the line and they occupied a small hill known as the Little Round Top. Their orders were to hold their position against attacks by the 15th Alabama, and they did, all day. They were able to beat off every assault on their position, time and again. Eventually, however, with half his regiment down, the colonel was informed that his men had run out of ammunition and they would soon be overrun by the

Confederates. What could he do? He could defy his orders and flee the battle, retreat, and save his men's lives; or he could order them to lay down their arms and surrender to the rebels. What he actually did was to order his men to fix bayonets, to charge downhill through the trees, screaming like Banshees, with one wing turning inward in a sweeping action onto the enemy's flank. It worked: the rebels threw down their weapons and surrendered. The far left of the Union line was held, and Chamberlain's action contributed greatly to Union victory on the third day.

Wherever we are in our spiritual warfare, in our battle against the old Adam, when Christ asks, who desires to come after Him, we too might flee the conflict; we too might surrender, and find it convenient to compromise with the world, the flesh and the devil. Or we might take up our cross, rather than a musket and bayonet, and fight the demonic rebellion head on, to die with Christ, only to find that this is the path to Life. As Paul tells the Galatians today, *'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me.'*