

During Orthros on Great and Holy Friday, the morning service served by anticipation on the Thursday evening, we hear the story of Christ's Passion, told through twelve gospel readings. The first, very long reading is from St John where we hear the words, '*These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*' (Jn 16:33)

Soon we shall commemorate, once again, Christ's victory, His overcoming of the world. And today, the third Sunday of the Great Fast, we venerate the Holy Cross, a means of execution that Christ converted into the instrument through which we are saved. Here, during these in-between-days, lest our zeal flag, lest our enthusiasm for the Lenten struggle grow cold, we are reminded of Christ's command to take up the Cross and follow Him. We understand well that working out our salvation has nothing to do with mere passivity; there can be no taking of rest for our part, presuming that we are assured of a blessed destiny anyway. For there are two sides to our salvation; a partnership, a synergy between our Redeemer and us, who through faith in Him are being saved.

At the end of this Liturgy we draw near to venerate the Cross in thanksgiving that He has borne away our sins; that, through His death and rising, our nature has been restored and recreated in the image and likeness of the New Adam. But this implies, for our part, that we take up the cross and follow Him in the way of witness, the way of asceticism: the sanctification of all that we suffer in this world for His sake. For it is only in this way that we can overcome and prove victors over the sinful passions that bind us into conformity with the old Adam. Yet in none of this can we advance unless we are in Christ and Christ in us through the mystery of the Holy Gifts, for without His grace, nothing can be brought to perfection.

But, truth to tell, we fear suffering; our whole nature recoils at the idea that we must endure pain, discomfort, persecution and loss. Having eaten from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; having become clothed in skin, we know only too well the ills to which all flesh is subject. Think, therefore, of how fear dominates so much of our life! *'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world,'* says Our Lord; He has even trampled down death, yet if we are honest, we fear death still, do we not, even we who believe in Him? Like the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish in the sea, we cling to life; our whole natural instinct is to survive, and it is a primeval fear that drives us to fight or flight to save ourselves.

Yet what does God say in the book of Proverbs? *'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.'* [Prov.9:10] Indeed, we fear death, but to fear the judgement of God that comes after is more dreadful; this is obvious to those who have faith. Those without faith know nothing of the judgement coming upon them and they pass away in their ignorance. Yet think of the holy martyrs for whom the denial of their Lord in order to save their skin for a few more years of this life, was not to be compared with faithfulness, even unto death. That they would be judged inspired a holy fear in them; a fear rooted and grounded in the love and knowledge of the Lord.

In two weeks, we shall commemorate St Mary of Egypt, one of the greatest contenders in the ascetic struggle, whose story is wonderful to read. Think, therefore, of all those wonder-working ascetic saints who, living in times of peace rather than of persecutions, also took up the Cross of the Lord in very different circumstances, yet moved by the very same fear of the Lord, fearful only of offending Him, they withdrew from the world and the flesh - still, of course, contending with the devil, to engage as soldiers of Christ in a spiritual warfare. Starting with the fear of the Lord, after decades of prayer and fasting, they ended their

days free from all passions, yet still died in the fear of the Lord, crying out with their last words, *God be merciful to me a sinner.*

What do we learn from a study of the holy scriptures, and from reflection upon the experience of all faithful Christians through the ages, but that the fear of the Lord trumps all worldly fears. In his Inaugural Address in 1933 US President Franklin D. Roosevelt famous said, *“The only thing we Have to fear Is Fear itself.”* Facing a daunting uphill task against the effects of the Great Depression, he was, no doubt, right to embolden the American people of his day, in order to face their political and economic struggle. But we can go even further than only being afraid of fear. For our primary struggle is neither political, nor economic, nor social; not even environmental. Our primary struggle is a spiritual struggle, seeking first the Kingdom of Heaven, as we have been commanded in the gospel. And we accept this because we have been planted in the fear of the Lord.

In the Prologue from Ochrid, St Nicolai Velimirovic wrote that, *‘The fear of the Lord is the salt of devotion. If this salt is lacking, all our devotion is insipid and tepid... Where is repentance without the fear of the Lord? Where is humility? Where is restraint? Where are chastity and patience, service and obedience?’* We can learn from this, we who are called to stand in prayer with renewed devotion, especially in this time of the Great Fast. If the mind should wander in prayer it can be gently brought back, calling to mind godly fear. If we talk to anyone whilst having our mind on other things, would it not be a mark of disinterest in the other person? So, it is in our prayer with God. It is holy fear that will bring us back to attentiveness, sobriety, watchfulness, waiting upon God.

9] When we come into this place let the fear of God first make us pause. Before we tread these courts let’s remember to whom this holy house is consecrated. Like Jacob in the book of Genesis, when he came to Bethel, said, *“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said,*

*“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!”* [Gen.28:16-17] Yet so is this place ‘dreadful,’ to use an old Anglo-Saxon word. So, it should be that we at least make the sign of the cross before we dare to enter here.

It was out of respect and the same holy fear that St Paul taught the faithful women of Corinth to cover their heads when they came together as a church. For man in his created nature reveals the glory of God, and woman in turn, reveals the glory of man, and she should veil her glory, says the apostle before the angels, for they are present in the church.

And when the Liturgy has begun, let us, indeed, stand upright and stand with fear, and let us attend. Put aside all idle talk, as we say in the Lenten prayer of St Ephraim, for to gossip and chat during the holy Liturgy is to lack any fear of God, which is a disrespect that must be rooted in pride; the proud do not fear God. More especially, those who approach the chalice can only do so in devotion to the Lord, if they pay heed to what is commanded, yes, commanded, not suggested, that we should *‘with fear of God, with faith and love, draw near.’*

Let us settle this matter, let us resolve to keep this spiritual doctrine, that the fear of the Lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom. Not worldly wisdom, of course, not that common sense that we all need to acquire as we go through life, just to get by, as we say with a modicum of comfort and the least inconvenience. And certainly not the wisdom of this present age, that despises the old virtues and replaces ancient boundaries with outright sin; where they would call it foolhardy to go against their current nostrums. As the prophet Isaiah said of those in his day, *‘The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear and let Him be your dread. He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.’* [Is.8:13-14]

But the wisdom of the current age is a delusion; as the apostle James tells us, *'This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic... But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.'* [Jm.3:15-17] This is our wisdom in the fear of God; the wisdom that was in creation at the beginning, and that wisdom is Christ. And if we take on that fear and start on that path to that wisdom from above, and teach it diligently to our children, we shall find it not so great a burden to take up the way of the Cross and follow in it. For though this is folly to Greeks and a scandal to the Jews, as St Paul tells the Corinthians, *'...We preach Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.'* [1 Cor.1:23-25] When we know the fear of God, anything else we might be afraid of is put in its place, and we too shall have overcome the world.