

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

“Why am I not like the saints?” This is a question which is easy to pose to ourselves. We read the lives of the saints, we hear about them in Church – the Theotokos, the Forerunner, great Apostles, learned Hierarchs, Ascetics, Kings and Queens, Martyrs – and we wonder why God has chosen them and not us. “I could never be a saint,” we lament, “I could never do what they do.”

When we hear these two words, “saint” and “holy,” we should remember that they are pointing to the same reality. And, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is to this reality, to sainthood, to holiness, we are called. “[A]s he who called you is holy,” says the Apostle Peter, “you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’” When starting his epistles, the Apostle Paul often uses this language,

To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints,
To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ
Jesus, called to be saints,
To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all
Achaia,
To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi,
To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae.

To be a Christian is to be holy: we are called to live as saints. We are Christians in as much as we are holy, in as much as we are saints. What a great calling we are given!

We must then, dear brothers and sisters, each answer the question: “How do I live as a saint, as a holy one?” Later in this Divine Liturgy we will hear the priest say, “The Holy Things for the holy.” Perhaps a strange saying, the Body and Blood of Christ offered to all the holy ones – to you and to me! – to all the saints here present yet the choir, on our behalf, will respond “One is holy, one is Lord: Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.” We are called holy, we are called saints, and yet only God is holy.

This apparent paradox is answered by the Apostle Paul when he explains, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” When we die with Christ in baptism, when we take up our own cross and follow him, we take on the holiness of God. By myself I am simply a body and soul but if I take up my calling to holiness – if I, so to speak, allow Christ to activate my own baptism – then I would become a true person, a person in whom the likeness and holiness of God is revealed, a person who is a saint.

Do you, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, allow the Lord to activate your baptism? Do I? Do we bring ourselves before the Lord at all times, not only Sunday mornings? Do we pray? Do we read Scriptures? Do we allow the mind of the Church to become our mind? Do we strive to be holy? Are we saints?

God made a promise, a covenant, with the patriarch Abraham, "I will certainly bless you, and assuredly multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore; and your seed shall inherit the cities of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you obeyed my voice." Abraham received this promise yet did not see its fulfilment because that fulfilment was in Christ. We, children of Abraham by grace and called to be saints, receive the promise to which the Apostle Paul draws our attention in today's Epistle reading. Abraham had faith because the Lord said, "by Myself," that is, by God, "I have sworn," and by this we can have confidence to "have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us." Our hope is the one we see crucified, the one we see buried, the one we see risen and ascended: our hope is Jesus Christ, "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

"[S]eize the hope," my brothers and sisters in Christ: be saints! "I have come," says the Lord, "that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." Accept the life which the Lord offers, the only true life, so that you may come closer to God.

The disciples had thought this would be easy: they knew how to be saints. The Lord had already given them "power over unclean spirits ... So they went out and preached that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them." This was recorded by the Evangelist Mark a few chapters prior to today's reading. Think back, if you can, to when you first came to faith in Christ, or perhaps when you joined the Orthodox Church, or when you came back to the Church after a period away. Being a saint was, perhaps, easy in those early days.

We could easily imagine when the father in today's Gospel reading brought his son to the disciples one of them came forward and expected the same result as a few chapters earlier. Perhaps others of them tried. "Why could we not cast it out?" they came asking to the Lord later. We, too, expect our spiritual life, our saintliness, to be the same. "Why is it harder to pray than it used to be?" we ask. "Why do I feel further away from God?" We feel like "it" - whatever "it" means - does not work anymore.

The Lord answers the disciples, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting." And the Lord answers us likewise. We cannot expect to grow in the spiritual life - to grow in prayer, to grow in holiness, to grow in love, to grow in humility - except with work on our part. When a child learns to walk we hold his hand to help him and support him but we eventually let go so he can learn to walk by himself: the child feels abandonment and may give up, return to the floor and cry. In the spiritual life, on the path to being like the saints, we may feel abandonment when the Lord takes away his hand and allows us to stand on our own two feet.

Do you, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, drop to the floor and cry when the Lord lets go of your hand? Do I? Yes, the Lord gave us support in the spiritual life to start with, he fed us on milk until we were ready for food, but he now wants us to grow into the person each of us is called to be, he wants us to be saints.

What should we do? The words of the Lord then are still relevant today, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" How many of us, and of our society, are willing to put our faith in money, in football, in food, in astrology, in fortune tellers, in

political parties, in gurus, in diets, in fashions, in ideologies? Yet all of these are unstable and fleeting. "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" This word, from the Word, is addressed to us, it is addressed to me.

"If you can believe," says the Lord, "all things are possible to him who believes." Yes, my brothers and sisters, "all things are possible," "if you can believe:" if we believe in Christ, place our hope in him and have faith that his Death and Resurrection have brought us to new life, then we can be saints. And the father replies, in words which have resonated through the centuries to all who struggle in the spiritual life: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" We offer to the Lord our belief in him, no matter how small it is, we offer it to him. "Yes Lord," we say, "I know that you have taken your hand away from me. I do not understand why but I trust in you." And we may fall, sometimes the Lord will pick us up again whereas at other times he may encourage us to stand by our own efforts, and he will return to us our small belief and multiply it within us.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Lord tells us that our growth in the spiritual life, our becoming saints and heirs of the promise made to Abraham, is through prayer and fasting. Let the remaining days of the Great Fast be for us all an opportunity to deepen our faith through prayer and fasting, to learn to reflect God's holiness in us that we may be beacons of him - lighthouses - and be known as the Church of God which is at Poole, those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints.

That we may glorify his saving Death and Resurrection and through him come to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.