

1st August 2021  
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## The Procession of the Cross

1] Today, the feast of the Procession of the Cross, is also the beginning of the Dormition Fast. As we prepare to celebrate the Falling Asleep of the Blessed Theotokos on 15th August, what better way to start than by taking up the Cross? At the end of the Liturgy today the Holy Cross is processed through the church for our veneration.

2] But we must remind ourselves once more of the implications of venerating the Cross of Christ. This is not just a comfort; we do not come to make a show of our piety before the world; not even to express some emotional attachment to a symbol. To venerate the Cross is to take it up and to follow in the way of Christ. We do the same, you will recall, on the 14th September, the Exaltation of the Cross, which is observed as a fast day; and on the Third Sunday of the Great Lenten Fast.

3] Today's commemoration has several historical connections, especially in warfare to protect Christian people: such as the remembrance of a Russian victory over the Bulgars, and the Greeks over the Saracens, where the Christian soldiers bore crosses as their banner. In this country too, King Oswald of Northumberland died in the battle of Maserfield against the pagan Mercians in 642, fighting under the banner of the Cross. It reminds us that the Cross cannot assure us of automatic victory or success amidst the changes and chances of this world, but it does remind us of what we are fighting for; for whom the struggle is waged.

4] In fact, today's commemoration has its real origins in the practice of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, where the relic of the True Cross was processed, first within the great church itself, and then through the streets of the city. This was done in August when, at that time of year, disease and plague were often rife in the city. So it was that the Cross, the sign of victory over death, was brought around in solemn procession, to consecrate the earth and the air, an act of faith, asking for protection from sickness.

5] It was also on the 1st August, in the year 988, that the Baptism of Rus was begun, following the conversion of Vladimir of Kiev. The Lesser Blessing of Waters, therefore, is also done in many places on this day. How appropriate, then, in these particular days through which we are passing, that we be invited to put our faith in the power of the Cross and entrust our whole life into the hands of God. Yes, the Health Secretary, Mr Javid, should not have apologised, when so many in this nation are indeed, still 'cowering,' having recently discovered that life here is, in fact, temporal.

6] Even when blessed with the benefits of scientific medicine, the Godless, the unbelieving, the majority in this land, have had to face, for the first time, perhaps, the fleeting nature of our life here; something obvious to earlier generations. And what answer do they have, what response can they make? The young can only look the other way and lose themselves in the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment, whilst the older citizens must venerate a national system of health to a degree that amounts to an apotheosis!

7] But let us process in the other direction: not the pursuit of self-indulgence and a life surrendered to hedonism. Instead, shall observe a time of restraint, the offering of a brief ascetic time consecrated to Christ and His Holy Mother, paying heed to the words of Solomon the Wise in the Old Testament:

*'Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.*

*I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure...*

*Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done*

*And on the labour in which I had toiled;*

*And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind.'*

[Eccles.2:10-11]

And we shall also stand apart from misplaced worship of any human construction, or institution, or service, rendering to Caesar indeed, those things that are Caesar's, but in the first place, rendering unto the Lord His due: worship, devotion, trust, faith, hope, love, and all that is encompassed and offered within the Divine Liturgy. For in this life and in all its difficulties and sufferings, though we rightly seek help from one another and any human agency, our first instinct must be to call upon the Name of the Lord, for whoever calls upon the Name

of the Lord will be saved. *'I will take up the cup of salvation,'* says the Psalmist. *'And call upon the name of the Lord.'* [Ps.115:4]

8] In our veneration of the Cross there is nothing of the talisman, amulet or lucky charm. The Cross does not work by magic: it is effective through faith. And if for us that faith in the Cross brings joy, be sure also that the demons believe and, indeed, know what it has wrought in the world, and they tremble! Just as they are sent scattering by Holy Water, for it reflects the power of raising the old Adam from the dead in Baptism.

9] Thus the Cross is everywhere for us: in our churches, marked on our gospels and prayer books, on sacred vestments, holy vessels; on our walls at home, in our vehicles, our places of work and public memorials; hanging around our neck since baptism into Christ's death, and finally, over our graves, awaiting the finally victory when the full power of the Cross will be revealed in our own transfiguration from glory to glory, in the spiritual body of the resurrection.

10] For those outside The Faith, the Cross is but a marker, an identifier, setting us in one category rather than another. But when we see the Cross, we must hear Our Lord addressing us directly and saying, *'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'* [Matt.16:24]

11] The first response to the recent pandemic among many governments and peoples has been to ask what restrictions, what regulations can we impose to ensure our safety? And how willingly even the English, who have surrendered not only their ancient faith but even their long fought liberties, have accepted all this. As William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania in the USA, once said, *'Those who will not be governed by God will be ruled by tyrants.'*

12] But for us, our first response, according to the wisdom given from above, had to be repentance, and our first defence, the mercy of God. But how few of the Christian leaders in this country issued that call, and any who did were not listened to, of course. Instead, we had the national broadcaster - *plague radio*, as it has now become,

acting like the fat boy in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, saying behind our backs, "*I am going to make your flesh creep.*"

13] But the Cross of Christ has assured our liberty and has freed us from fear. Those who gathered here, Sunday by Sunday, have proclaimed an altogether different approach. As St Paul tells the Corinthians, '*But we all, with unveiled face, [let the reader understand!] beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*' [2Cor.3:18] And listen to him today writing to the Romans, and describing how a sound Christian community uses its spiritual gifts and graces for the common good, and for the edification of all its members: in prophecy, in ministry, in teaching, in exhorting, in leading, in acts of mercy, in loving without hypocrisy. He speaks of abhorring evil; cleaving to the good; Loving one another; honouring and preferring one another; diligent, not slothful; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing steadfastly in prayer; communicating to the necessities of the saints; given to hospitality. (cf. Rom.12:9-13]

14] Well, we have held together and I know of many instances of your service in the bonds of Christ; of how you have cared for one another, in all kinds of circumstances, during these days. In the face of all that has happened around us, it does take courage and fortitude to take up the cross, not cowering with the old Adam but standing upright with the New. To prophesy is to speak authentically, and with authority, the true Word of God in any situation. And the prophetic message of these past months is, as ever, a call to repentance. Let us be sure, as far as in us lies, to use these next two weeks well, embracing the Holy Cross and preparing to enter once again, into the Joy of our Lord and of His Holy Mother.