

11th September 2022
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Sunday before Holy Cross

1] In Orthodox Christianity we always appear to be either feasting or fasting. Currently, we are in the joyous feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos, but we are also approaching the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a day for fasting. Although the Church has always boasted, with St Paul, in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ [Gal.6:14] it took a long time, as you might expect, for an instrument of judicial torture to become the banner of the new people of God. Indeed, it was not until the time of St Constantine the Great, who abolished crucifixion as a punishment, for the cross to become a widely displayed public symbol, the eikon of the Faith and inscribed openly to signify the gospel.

2] In Britain, it was the martyred king Oswald, as recoded by St Bede the Venerable, who at the battle of Heavenfield, set up a large wooden cross as his banner under which he fought, so that he became the first here to defend a Christian kingdom under the sign of the Holy Cross. St Oswald was martyred in 642 at the battle of Maserfield, near Oswestry, fighting against the pagan king Penda.

3] The Church herself has often been likened to an army, leading a spiritual warfare against evil, her members, always seeking purification and holiness, through taking up the cross in the ascetic life. As prefigured of the Bride of Christ, the Church, in the Old Testament Song of Solomon: 'Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?' (Sg.of Sol.6:10)

4] There is a very beautiful hymn that comes from the western Latin tradition. Written by St Venantius Fortunatus,

who was bishop of Poitiers in France during the sixth century, as well as a noted poet, the first stanza of the hymn in Latin runs,

Vexilla regis prodeunt, fulget crucis mysterium,
quo carne carnis conditor, suspensus est patibulo.

Which I might translate in prose as,

The royal banners go forward, The mystery of the cross shines out, on which, in the flesh, the creator of the flesh, has been suspended on the gibbet. Other translations are available, as they say!

4] According to legend, in the year 568, St Radegund presented the city of Poitiers with a fragment of the true cross. While she was still on her way, two miles from the city, a great procession of people, led by Fortunatus the bishop, met her with banners and crosses. And as they marched, they sang this hymn composed by Fortunatus.

5] This Sunday, on Wednesday the Fourteenth, the day of the Cross, and next Sunday we focus our attention upon what that hymn calls *crucis mysterium*, the mystery of the cross. It is no surprise that St Helena is a patron saint of archaeologists, unearthing what was to be discovered; revealing the true cross and manifesting to the world what had always been there, hidden within the mystery of faith itself. There are many small fragments of the cross in the world, of which we, reputedly, hold one such and it lies on the holy table in the altar of this church.

6] Last month I preached to you about the holy sacrifice in the Liturgy, with which, of course, the *mysterium* of the cross is obviously and intimately connected as the instrument of our redemption. And it is the contemplation of that instrument that we engage in during this season.

7] Christianity is presented to us as a series of mysteries in which we come to share, beginning with the mystery of Baptism. Christ has commanded and commissioned us to baptise in the name of the Blessed Trinity [cf. Matt.28:19] And how does St Paul expound this mystery: 'Do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?... That our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with.' (Rom.6:3 & 6)

8] These holy mysteries of the faith: of the resurrection, of salvation, of the incarnation, of the Holy Trinity, whatever they be, are with us all our life and we can be very familiar with them. Often, however, although we venerate them outwardly and indeed, piously, it can take time for a deeper, more profound understanding to enter into the mind; when suddenly much is revealed and we grasp the inner truth: what St Paul describes as, The wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' (1 Cor.2:7-8)

9] Many, perhaps even a majority of faithful people, are content to accept the mystery of faith as they receive it, trusting in God's mercy and love for mankind. Following the commandments of Christ, they can find salvation, of course. But there are always others who seek, even now, what St Paul refers to in his first letter to the Corinthians: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.' (1 Cor.2:9-10) As in the parable of the Sower, there

are indeed those who bring forth fruit in this life, thirty-fold, sixty-fold, and even a hundred-fold [cf. Matt.13:8]

10] This inner, received knowledge of the mysteries of God is elusive, especially the more we are engaged in the affairs of this world, which is why we have always looked to those in the monastic life for authentic spiritual guidance. Neither is this knowledge something that can be automatically gleaned from a life of study and scholarship, although, great learning is to be honoured among us. Thomas Aquinas, the renowned thirteenth century theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, Author of the *Summa Theologica*, had, towards the end of his life, a vision of God whilst celebrating mass. So profound was the experience that he declared all his writings to be like straw in comparison. He never wrote another word and died not long afterwards.

11] If we would seek this assurance, this knowledge, this familiarity and friendship with God, it will require both our own efforts and struggle, as well as its completion and crowning through the grace of God, as well as what He permits to be revealed, according to our spiritual capacity. And it involves the seeker after truth in repentance, the acquiring of the mind of Christ; it requires humility and an ascetic detachment from the distractions of this life. It is the narrow way. And above all it depends on our love for God and for our neighbour, for If we have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge but do not have love, we are nothing. [cf. 1 Cor.13:2]

12] For the knowledge of God comes through what is called the noetic science or knowledge of the heart. The Mind, or *nous* in the Greek, we might think of as a kind of energy in the centre or heart of our self-awareness; what the Fathers

called the noetic faculty. These are hard things, I know, but they bear further study for those drawn to them by God.

13] Last week we blessed the students and the children beginning school for the new term. They will learn logically and rationally, we hope. As a former teacher I know how important this all is. This is, though, but surface knowledge: useful to make our way through the world, but it does not gain entry into the deep things of God, as Thomas Aquinas discovered in the end. The logical mind, no more than the emotional mind, cannot pierce the deep things of God, such as the *mysterium crucis*, the mystery of the cross, that we approach once again. From the standpoint of Orthodox theology, the mind, the *nous*, on the one hand, and logic and intellectual pursuits on the other, are not the same thing. The one is dependent on the brain and its capacity alone; the other, on the mind in the heart, the centre of the self. It is what the Book of Exodus describes when, 'Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.' (Ex.20:21)

14] However we approach the coming Exaltation of the Cross, however we observe the day, the Son of God must be lifted up, revealing our salvation, just as Moses the God-seer, lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. However profound your knowledge of God, however deep you have plunged into the mysteries of faith, '*Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous,*' as the Psalmist says. '*And give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name.*' (Ps.96/97:12). For although with intellectual knowledge many may observe and judge the One, Holy, Orthodox-Catholic Church of Jesus Christ as it might observe and judge any other religious institution, we know that we do not live in an institution, for the Church is not an institution but is herself a mystery, and we have come to a hospital of the soul, where the soul, through the cross is restored to health, and our final goal is *thosis*, eternal communion in God.

