



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Degrees of Desperation Week of May 14, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!

Behold, I make all things new. (Revelation 21:5)

The Sundays after Pascha are characterized by a series of events in the Gospels that illustrate the way in which the lives of people were changed forever when they encountered the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, immediately following Pascha on the Second and Third Sundays of Pascha, we hear the familiar accounts of those who confessed Him at the time of the Resurrection: St. Thomas who came to faith when he probed the hands and sides of our Lord, and then the faithfulness and loyalty of the Holy Myrrh-bearers who served the Lord even when others abandoned Him. But beginning on the Fourth Sunday of Pascha through the Sixth Sunday (last week through next week) we hear three stories that illustrate our Lord's encounter with people who were in varying degrees of what I would call desperation. First, the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda; then, the meeting of the Samaritan woman (St. Photini, or in Russian, St. Svetlana) which is this week's story; and finally next week the healing of the man born blind. Most of these stories come from the Gospel of John, for it is the Fourth Gospel that presents to us in many respects the most piercing insight into Who Jesus really is.

This Sunday's Gospel is different from the other accounts I mentioned above, in that it is not a miracle story per se. It is not about the healing of this or that person in hopeless circumstances, but rather about the encounter of our Lord with a woman from a region of the Holy Land called Samaria, a province in the northern part of Israel which in ancient times was inhabited by people who had descended from the intermarriage of their own Jewish ancestors with pagan idolaters from Assyria. The Samaritans were therefore held in contempt by the pious Jewish believers from the South, and the very fact that our Lord even spoke with one of them, a woman no less, was somewhat shocking to His disciples and to other contemporaries of His time. In addition to these things, however, the Samaritan woman, Photini, was living a life that was in disarray. She was not blind or paralyzed physically, but she was unsettled. More than unsettled, she was desperate in her own way. She was a person not in peace with her life. I can say this because of our Lord's comment to her when she engages Him in conversation. Our Lord asks her to call her husband; she replies that she has no husband, to which our Lord replies that He knows she has in fact been with "five husbands."

The conversation that ensues between them reaches the heights of true mystical theology. The Lord speaks of "living water," of "enlightenment"; Photini engages Him in further conversation, in a spirited "give and take;" she allows herself to enter into a relationship with Him, the source of that "living water," the giver of Life Eternal, the source of that very peace which St. Paul would later call "the Peace that passes all understanding." According to Holy Tradition, she leaves that encounter with the Lord at the well, returns to her people in Samaria, and indeed becomes the first apostle to the Samaritans. She who had been on the outside, has now been brought in by the One Who heals not only our physical illnesses but the much more serious illnesses of our soul. The woman of Samaria becomes St. Photini, whose very name means "light."

All three of these lessons from the Gospel of St. John, this week, last week and next week, present to us people who encountered Jesus in the midst of various degrees of desperation: a man who could not get himself into the pool of Bethesda in time to be healed, a man blind from birth with no chance of ever being healed other than through an act of new or re-creation, and a woman whose life was evidently in a state of desperate disarray. We all understand; we all have known and will know – every one of us – such disarray and desperation ourselves. There will be illness, disappointment, lack of peace, fear, anguish, suffering, and eventually for each of us, death. This is the human condition in this world so brazenly separated from God. We will all know various and perhaps at different times in our lives the complete array of desperation in this world of sin.

When we face those times, Brothers and Sisters, think back to these weeks in the Paschal Season; think back to these profound lessons from the Gospel of John. Like the paralytic and the man born blind and the Samaritan woman, St. Photini, we too will only be healed in the desperate illnesses of our souls through our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is He Who said: *Behold I make all things new!* This promise of re-creation, healing, peace and Life is not limited to the past, nor is it limited to the present, even though it does in fact begin for each of us in this life; but, it extends into the future, into eternity itself, for the peace that passes understanding is something that each of us will experience in that Life of the Kingdom promised to all who follow Him Who truly does make all things new.

St. Photini, pray for us sinners as we too experience times of desperation; pray that our souls may be saved.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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