



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Take up Thy Cross and Follow Christ!
October 4, 2020

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is in our midst! He is and every shall be!

And he said to all, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9: 23-25)

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

These words were said by our Lord to His disciples, particularly to St. Peter in response to his confession of faith that Jesus is the Savior, the Son of God, the Christ that was to come into the world. As soon as Peter makes his profound confession of faith, the Lord instructs him and the other disciples as to what that confession entails. In other words, He teaches clearly what discipleship actually means.

It is perhaps the case that the disciples recognized who He is, but were not immediately aware of what that meant. Some disciples to be sure expected the Christ to be entirely other than what Jesus revealed Himself to be. They expected that God would send His Christ, His Messiah, to purge the world of injustice and evil, particularly by removing the pagan Roman Caesar and replacing him with a true king of Israel, one who would once again restore the glories of the ancient Davidic kingdom long gone. But the Lord makes clear from the start that He has a different purpose. He tells His followers in clear words

that He will suffer and die an ignominious death and rise thereafter. How could they have understood? We hear the words of our Lord and bow before His cross over 2000 years later, and I wonder, do we understand any better than those early disciples?

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily – daily – and follow me.”

To take up our cross means a number of things, but most important among them is to follow the will of God. Our Lord of course demonstrated this on the night of His betrayal clearly – so clearly, that we have no excuse not to understand. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup to pass, the bitter cup of suffering and death; but, even so deeply troubled, He finished His prayer with the words each of us must pray from our hearts daily, “Nevertheless, not my will, by Thine be done!”

To take up our cross means to follow and to do as He bids and as He did. It means to strive to do God’s revealed will, of course, to follow the commandments and repent from the heart when we fail. It means to treat others as He treats us, with love, with sacrificial self-giving, with intent and purpose for seeking what is best for the other. It means to strive to be one with Him as He, the Lord Jesus, is one with the Father. You see, it is possible to seek our own well-being, our own good, our own salvation even, and never to know Him. To seek our own good as an end in itself is to lapse into self-centeredness and sin; to seek the good of others, however, is to take up our cross as He did and learn the meaning of salvation in totality. Salvation, Brothers and Sisters, is not a matter of saving ourselves; but, it is a matter of being one with that One Who shows us that the way to Life and Health and Wholeness is found only in our self-giving and care for one another. That is why the spiritual fathers of the Holy Orthodox Faith say quite plainly that one cannot be saved by oneself, but only in communion and service and sacrifice for others. This is what the cross shows us; this is what Christ taught His disciples when they confessed Him to be the One True Christ; this is what we must strive to follow and emulate with all of our being each and every day. Our first prayer of the day should be, “Lord, bless this day, and grant me the Grace of Thy Most Holy Spirit to give myself for the sake and the good others whom I meet this day even as Thou didst give Thyself for my good!”

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross which continues this Sunday is one of the great Feasts of the Church for precisely these reasons. It is possible to know scripture, rules, regulations and canons and still not know Christ. Only if we know Christ, if our hearts strive to be one with Him in word, deed and in every essential way of our human existence, will we know the power of His cross, for it will be imprinted on our hearts and we too will give ourselves for others as He gave and continues to give for us.

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily – daily – and follow me.” To this end may the All-Holy Spirit guide and enable and empower each of us!

Fr. Elias

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