

The Cross Shows us the Life of God

A Homily on the Sunday Before the Elevation of the Cross (Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14)

On Sunday, September 25, 2016, Archimandrite Sergius (Bowyer), abbot of St. Tikhon's Monastery in Waymart, PA, visited and celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the St. Nicholas chapel at Moscow's St. Catherine's church. He offered the following homily on the place of the Cross in our lives.

It's interesting that the Cross is placed before us on this Sunday before the Elevation of the Cross, midpoint between the Lord's Pascha and the next Pascha, between His Crucifixion and the next Crucifixion. Liturgically speaking, the Cross is placed right in the middle and the Church always has a reason for doing such things. It's a good reminder for us that the Cross is the center of our life in the Lord. The Cross offers us a radically different perspective on life in this world. It is something from above as the Lord Himself said: no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven (Jn. 3:13).

We heard in the Epistle today about how the people were trying to keep the Old Testament law but couldn't do it, and so St. Paul offers us something that is above the Law. He says in other epistles that the law can only be fulfilled by grace. It's grace that fulfills the precondition of the law, which is the perfection of God Himself. Therefore, what the Cross offers us is an image and icon of what God's life is like, what His love is like, and ultimately what He calls us to. This life of God for man is a cross, which ultimately leads us to our resurrection—not only personally, but corporately on the last day.

The resurrection must happen inside of us during this life. We must rise from the death of our sinfulness and passions to new life. This is not something that happens in one moment but rather it's worked out over a lifetime of struggle as the Lord Himself says: he that endureth to the end shall be saved (Mt. 10:22). Our task today is to do what we know we should be doing right now—that thing that we know we should be doing right now but don't want to, and which we need to ask the Lord's help with, to fulfill that small task of faithfulness, in order to move towards the Lord and ultimately towards our own resurrection.

We heard in the Gospel parable about how the man invited everyone to the wedding feast but many did not want to come. In another account of the same parable it says he went out into all the places and compelled them to come in. A lot of times God Himself will push us or try to move us in the right direction and try to compel us through the difficulties and sufferings of our circumstances to come into His Kingdom. Ultimately that's what we were created for—to live in the Kingdom. It's in our best interest and it's in the very fabric of our beings as who we are. When we refuse to except this it is what's called hell.

It's our task to continue to work with God and to allow Him to work with us and to beseech the Lord to enter more fully into this Kingdom in this life. This will be a challenge for us and this will be a cross, because we are fallen and we are mortal. Death goes deep into the very fabric of our being, and Christ needs to conquer that death within us and raise us up in this life, today. So let us all pray that the Lord would work with us to raise us up and that we'd be willing to beseech Him to help us be open to this process.

Let us beseech the Lord to give us the strength to carry our cross, just as the Lord carried His Cross, always remembering that the goal of our life is to love God and to love each other. There's nothing more important than this. If I say I love God that means I pray. And if I say I love you that means I pray for you. Let us all pray for one another today, for our salvation, for our mutual love and good will, and that ultimately none of us would hear the words like the man in the Gospel who was removed from the wedding feast—from the Kingdom.

There's no guarantees, however. We must be like St. Silouan and have one thought: that all be saved. Let us pray for one another today that God would strengthen us and that God would help us, and that we would always remember that we are each other's greatest strength, in the Church. May God save, help, and bless us all.