

Homily on the Exaltation of the Life Giving Cross

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we commemorate in this present feast the finding of the Holy and Precious Cross of Christ by St. Helena in Jerusalem in the 4th century. St. Isaac of Syria tells us that just as the Presence and Glory of God dwelt within the wood of the Ark in the Old Testament so also this same Glory and Power of God now resides in the Holy Wood of the Cross. The glory that departed from the Ark of the Old Covenant entered into the Holy Cross of the New Covenant on which the Lord was enthroned (when He was crucified).

Today we bow down, as the hymn says, “in worship before the Cross” because we recognize that the glory or Shikena of God and the Wood of the Cross have been inseparably joined. As St. John of Damascus explains: “I do not venerate the matter but I venerate the Creator of matter, Who became matter for me, Who condescended to live in matter, and Who, through matter accomplished my salvation; I do not cease to respect the matter through which my salvation is accomplished.”(PG 94:1245AB.) The hymns of the service there forth exhort us: “Be glad, O heaven, and rejoice, O earth! The all-holy Cross cometh forth, sanctifying with grace us who venerate it as a well-spring of holiness and the cause of all deification...” for today at its exaltation “The Cross of the Lord, which is venerated by the faithful, is seen to be as bright as the sun; and as we kiss it our souls are enlightened.”

The Cross is not an ornament or a piece of jewelry but the Way...it is the Way of Christ which is quintessentially a life of love and forgiveness. We are commanded to love our enemies: the Cross. We are commanded to do good to those who hate us: the Cross. We are commanded to pray for those who spit in our face: the Cross. If we have not love in our hearts, we have not God in our hearts, for God is love. The goal is God, the goal is to love. As Fr. Sophrony says: "The bidding "love your enemies," is the 'fire on the earth' that the Lord brought by His coming...and It is the Uncreated Divine Light which shone down on the Apostles on Mount Tabor." This is the glory of the Cross.

It was in a garden and through a Tree that man fell away from God and it was in a garden and through the Tree of the Cross that God reconciled the creation to Himself effectively healing mankind's fall. Now we must appropriate and accept this gift of healing: As Orthodox Christians we must not be sentimental spectators of the Cross but rather participants of the life-giving death of Christ, crucifying the passions, the selfishness, the pettiness, and the sinful inclinations that separate us from God and lead us to death. We must fix ourselves to the Cross by keeping the commandments of the Lord, remembering and accepting that the Cross is the narrow way which we all must go and which leads us to life and to the Kingdom of heaven. St. Isaac the Syrian tells us that the wisdom and "the knowledge of the Cross is concealed in the sufferings of the Cross. The more OUR participation in its sufferings, the greater the perception

we gain through the Cross¹ [into the mysteries of God.]”

Indeed, to be an Orthodox Christian means that the principle way we learn about the creation, the fall, salvation, and the world to come is through suffering. We don't pray for suffering but rather endure for the sake of Christ the sufferings that are the common lot of all mankind. This fallen world, St. Maximus tells us, is always in need of a Cross, a crucifixion. We must not accept the fallen world to be “natural and normal.” This is the greatest lie that is perpetrated on us by the media, the passions and the devil for it excuses sin instead of making us realize change is possible and to work for that change. The only ones who are really natural and normal are the Saints. The rest of us are in dire need of the Cross which we must use as a ladder and a tool to restore our nature to its heavenly, holy, normal and natural state.

In hindsight we will see that our suffering in imitation of Christ has great benefits for us: it can draw us closer to God, it enables us to have empathy and concern for others, and it helps us to stay away from sin, for as St. Peter says, “He who is suffering, ceases from sin.” And yet, while we are going through trials and tribulations, they are perplexing and may cause us to despair. However, this is precisely how patience and character is instilled within us so we must not become fainthearted. Through this acceptance of trials and tribulations with faith, we begin to acquire humility which St. John Climacus says is the mother of perfection.

¹St. Isaac. Homily 74.

In conclusion, we recall that it was on this day that St. John Chrysostom died sixteen hundred and one years ago. His feast is transferred to November 13th in order that it might be celebrated with due honor and solemnity. How fitting that one who suffered so dearly for Christ, and died in exile, carrying his Cross across out the regions of Asia-minor reminds us clearly today: We must not just read about the Cross and the Crucifixion but rather we must hold the remembrance of them “deeply in our hearts: the crown of thorns, the robe, the reed, the blows, the nails, the blows, the spitting, the mockery.” He says that these things, if continually meditated on and recalled, “are sufficient *to take down all anger,*” which is the primary obstacle to love, the wicked offspring of pride and one of the main reasons why grace cannot enter and abide in our hearts for it is, as St. Theophan says, the fire of hell. He says that “if we are mocked and suffer injustice, [trials, suffering and difficulties,] we must say [to ourselves with humility] “the servant is not greater than His Lord.”²” For we recall as the Scripture explains, that we must, through great tribulations, enter into the Kingdom of heaven.

My brethren, there is no other way to the Kingdom of Heaven but through our own personal Cross....a Cross that can become sweet and fragrant with life like the flowers that surround the Cross in front of us if we endure it for the sake of the love of God. Let us endure it bravely, with a freely chosen courage, hoping in God's mercy that if we endure with Him, we shall also live and reign with

²Homily 84.

Him, for we have no continuing city here. Let us call heaven our Home and let us endeavor with all our might to imitate the King who showed us the way. For: “Today [as the hymns of the Church tell us] the Cross is exalted and the world is sanctified. For Thou, O Christ, Who art enthroned with the Father and the Holy Spirit hast spread Thine arms upon it, and drawn the world to the knowledge of Thee. Make worthy of divine glory those that have put their trust in Thee. Amen.