



SUNDAY OF THE HOLY CROSS

April 7

THE GOSPEL READING

Mark 8:34-38; 9:1

[Take Up the Cross and Follow Him]

The Lord said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

THE SERMON

The Lord Jesus and His disciples were traveling throughout the towns of Galilee, and He asked them, "Who do men say that I am?" The disciples said, "Some say John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets." To this, Jesus replied, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." From this moment on, Jesus began to teach His disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed, and after three days rise again.

When Peter heard this, he objected. Having recognized that Jesus was the Messiah (which is the meaning of "Christ"), he could only conceive that the Savior of Israel would



GREEK ORTHODOX
ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

triumph over all enemies through the exercise of power and not weakness, much less death. He could not yet understand that the Cross is the means through which death would be destroyed, and all spiritual enemies would be defeated. Therefore, this became the occasion when the Lord taught His disciples that the door to eternal life will always open on the other side of the cross. He said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This is an invitation for us to draw close to the Lord and become like Him. *For if we die with Him, we will also live and reign with Him.*

The cross was the Roman Empire's tool for cruel punishment, torture, and execution. However, Christ transforms all things, and He turns even sorrow and pain into paths towards healing and redemption. He destroys death by death. The most significant symbol of death in the ancient world has become a symbol of life and resurrection for us. The Cross of our Lord was the means through which He triumphed over death and became a Sacrifice for our redemption. In this way, the cross is, for us, a symbol of our suffering in imitation of Christ and a *promise* of His victory. The Holy Cross is the sign and sacrament of the liberation and restoration we have been given because of Christ's sacrifice. By the Cross, we are united to Him and protected by Him. In the Apolytikion of the Holy Cross, we chant, "Save, O Lord, Your people and bless Your inheritance; grant victory to the faithful over their adversaries, and protect Your people, by the power of Your Cross."

Trials and tribulations are inevitable in this world, but the Holy Spirit gives us His grace to persevere and, through endurance, to acquire faith, hope, and love. Jesus tells us that whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for His sake and the gospel's will save it. As Saint John Chrysostom says, "For your soul, if you lose it, you will have no other soul to give: yea, though you had the world . . . you would not be able, by paying down all earthly goods, with the earth itself, to redeem but one soul."

The greatest paradox of Christian living is that when we try to hold on to the things of this world in a selfish way, we lose them. We also lose eternal life because we have made earthly possessions and pleasures our ultimate treasure. On the other hand, paradoxically, when we center our lives on God and do everything as an expression of our love for Christ and our neighbor, we enter into fellowship with God in this life and we receive eternal life with Him in heaven as well.

We practice self-denial, especially during this time of Great Lent, out of our love for God and obedience to the Gospel. Therefore, taking up our cross is neither a punishment nor an end in and of itself, but rather how we overcome this fallen world for the Kingdom of God. Cooperating with the grace of God in the Holy Spirit, we crucify our "flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24), and we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who lives in us so that we can walk by His power and according to His will.

We are called to carry our personal cross — a cross of desires, passions, sins, and challenges in life. When we set aside the things that take us farther from God and choose the path of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we begin to bear the fruit of the Spirit, which is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). The Lord calls us to die to our broken selves so that we

can be made new in Him. It is important to remember that even if our cross becomes heavy, we know that there is the resurrection behind every cross. The Divine Light of God shines in and through us on the other side of the cross. This is why the Lord revealed that light to His disciples in the Transfiguration, which took place right after He spoke these words.

The last sentence of this gospel reading — “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” — refers to the Holy Transfiguration. Indeed, Peter, John, and James saw the Kingdom of God as a power and as light at the Holy Transfiguration. We can experience this same power and light of the Kingdom of God during the Divine Liturgy as well as in our personal prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”).

Bearing the cross of Christ takes work. It requires that we deny our selfish will so that we are ready to receive Christ. It requires that we empty our hearts so we can be filled with the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we need to remember to love ourselves as creations of God to help others who are also creations of God. We learn to live in faith, hope, and love by taking up our cross and following Him. In faith, we know He is with us even in trials. In hope, we know that the Light of the Resurrection awaits us on the other side of the cross. In love, we learn that, as it was with Christ, the way to God’s glory is through humility and perseverance.

The only way out is *through*. The way to glory passes through the cross daily. After having given Himself entirely and without reservation for our redemption, Christ was seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. *We too will reign with Him if we take up our cross and follow Him.*