



SUNDAY AFTER HOLY CROSS

September 18

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

After feeding a multitude of four thousand people, the Lord Jesus begins to teach His disciples. He says to them, "Who do men say that I am? His disciples answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." Then the Lord asks them very specifically, and He says, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers and says to Him, "You are the Messiah," which is to say, "You are the Christ." (Matthew 16:13-16). This sets the context for this passage, as the Lord teaches us what it means to follow Him.

Immediately after Apostle Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord be-



GREEK ORTHODOX
ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

gins to teach them that the Son of Man will suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and after three days, rise again. This seems almost contradictory to the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah. In the minds and hearts of the Judean people at that time, the Messiah was expected to be a conquering warrior who would defeat the enemies of God's people and set them free forever.

The Messiah, they thought, was meant to be the One anointed with the power and glory of God. The One who would liberate Israel from its oppressors and rule from his throne in Jerusalem over a free and prosperous Israel. However, after confessing that Jesus is the Messiah, the disciples hear from Him that, instead of defeating enemies and setting up His throne, Jesus would rather suffer many things and be killed. Peter reacted to this, took the Lord aside, and began to rebuke Him. He told the Lord that He should not speak of such things – of pain, rejection, or crucifixion. He is the Messiah!

However, the Lord rebukes Peter, saying, "...you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23). The Lord tells Peter that the way to freedom, glory, and eternal life is through the Cross. He says to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his Cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

To love Christ means that we follow Him. Jesus teaches us that to follow Him means to walk with Him on the path He has trodden. This path leads to the Resurrection and eternal life. However, this path goes through the Cross and the grave before it reaches the morning of Pascha (Easter). We need to descend into the tomb with the Lord before we ascend with Him into Heaven. When the Lord allows suffering in our lives – which is inescapable – it is to conform us to His human nature, that is, to make us more like Him. We remember that the Lord is the eternal Son of God Who voluntarily took on human nature, frailty, and the pain inflicted upon Him for our redemption. He suffered for our sake. So when He calls us to take up our own cross, He invites us to walk with Him so that we can live with Him forever.

This is not always easy because it requires that we say, "not as I will, but as You will, oh Lord" (Matthew 26:39). We are called to embrace our cross, whatever it may be for each one of us individually. This does not mean that we seek to suffer for its own sake. It does not mean that we do not seek solutions for our problems, nor that we refrain from asking Christ, the Mother of God, and the Saints to pray for us when we encounter difficult, even desperate, situations. It means, however, that we trust the Lord, and "...commend ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God" (as we pray in the Divine Liturgy). This is not always easy, but all God asks is that we try. And we do not have to do it alone, since God is always with us.

Saint Augustine of Hippo says, "The Lord has required that 'whoever will come

after him must deny himself.' But what He commands is neither hard nor painful when He helps us in such a way so that the very thing he requires may be accomplished . . . For whatever seems hard in what is enjoined, love makes easy." In other words, the Lord helps us with His grace, which the Holy Spirit gives us in many ways. Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Lord says, "You are My servant. I chose you, and have not forsaken you. Fear not, for I am with you . . . I am your God who strengthens you; and I will help and secure you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:9-11). The Lord Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Ultimately, He gives us a great promise: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

In this way, we are called to take up our cross, and follow Christ. This means two things. Firstly, we become ready to give up everything that keeps us bound to the ground, that is, things that seem essential to us from a secular perspective but keep us away from spiritual growth and Christ. We learn to be "mindful of the things of God" more than "the things of men."

Secondly, as difficult as it sounds, we prepare to forgive everyone who might hurt us – and follow Christ in the path of love, grace, and peace. At the Cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Forgiving others who hurt us deeply and unjustly seems almost impossible. But it is with the grace and love of Christ that it becomes possible. This path is not easy, and indeed it is full of challenges and obstacles, but it is the path leading to salvation — it is the path to unity with God.

The way of the Cross leads to eternal glory. This is the path Jesus opens for us. He calls us to follow Him to the Cross as a means to glory. Therefore, the passage continues, "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him, the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." This refers to the heavenly glory the disciples would witness on Mount Tabor. The Transfiguration occurred right after this, reminding us that this is our destiny — *if we follow Christ.*

All the generations of Saints faithful who experience a spiritual rebirth and a transformation (all those who change their lives and follow Christ through prayer, repentance, and work on virtues) experience the Kingdom of God in their lives. All those who seek theosis, that is, union with Christ, spiritually see the Divine Light of Mount Tabor, the Light of the Transfigured Christ. The way to that glory passes through embracing our cross, denying ourselves, and following Him. He walks with us through pain and suffering — and leads us to peace, joy, and eternal life.