



SUNDAY AFTER HOLY CROSS

September 17

THE GOSPEL READING

Mark 8:34-38; 9:1

[Jesus' First Prophecy of His Passion]

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, saying to them, "Who do men say that I am?" His disciples answered that people had various opinions. Then the Lord asks them very specifically, saying, "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." This sets the context for this passage, as the Lord teaches us what it means to follow Him.



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Immediately after Apostle Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord begins 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 Jewish 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. He would be 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 pain, rejection, or crucifixion. He is the Messiah!

However, the Lord rebukes Peter, telling him that he was thinking with a worldly mindset. The way to freedom, glory, and eternal life is *through* the Cross. Therefore, the Lord tells His disciples that whoever would follow Him has to take up their own cross. He says that whoever puts the desires of this life as the priority, will lose them. On the other hand, whoever puts the desires of eternal life first, will receive it. The Lord teaches that achieving all things in this world cannot be compared to receiving eternal life.

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 Christ before we *ascend* with Him into Heaven. When the Lord allows suffering in our lives, which is inescapable, it is to make us more like Him. Christ is the eternal Son of God Who voluntarily took on human nature and its suffering. The pain inflicted upon Him is for our redemption. He suffered for our sake. 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 to Him, not as I will, but as You will, Lord. 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 suffering's sake. It does not mean that we do not seek solutions for our problems, nor that we refrain from asking Christ to help us, and the Mother of God and the Saints to intercede 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. 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. Jesus tells us that His grace is sufficient for us, that His strength in us is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Ultimately, He gives us the great promise: that He will never leave us or forsake us (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 this world.

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 says, “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. The Lord calls us to be courageous in the face of suffering and opposition from this world, knowing that His glory is with us. 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 destination, *if* we follow Christ.

All the generations of holy people who undergo a spiritual rebirth and a transformation, experience the Kingdom of God in their lives here on earth. All those who follow Christ through prayer, repentance, and virtue are transformed. 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 He leads us to peace, joy, and eternal life.