



SUNDAY OF THE HOLY CROSS

March 27

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

Jesus Christ and His disciples were traveling throughout the towns of Galilee, and He asks them, "Who do men say that I am?" They provide some of the different responses they had heard. He asks them again, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers and says to Him, "You are the Christ." From that point, He begins to teach them that the Son of Man must endure many things, He will be rejected by the religious leaders, He will be killed, and He will rise again after three days (Mark 8:27-31).

As Peter hears this, he objects. Having recognized that Jesus was the *Messiah* (which is what *Christ* means), he presumes that the Savior of Israel would triumph over all enemies. How can He die? Peter could not yet understand that the Lord through His Cross



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would destroy death and defeat all spiritual enemies. The Lord teaches His disciples that the gateway to eternal life opens through His sacrifice on the Cross. The Lord adds that: "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 Christ-like in order to be with Him forever.

Death by 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 a passageway for healing and redemption. He destroys death by death. The most grim symbol of death and dying in the ancient world becomes the ultimate symbol of life and redemption. The Cross of our Lord was how He triumphed over death and sacrificed Himself for our salvation. In this way, the Cross is also a symbol of our own suffering in imitation of Christ. The Holy Cross is the symbol of the victory of the Lord over sin and death, and against spiritual enemies. 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."

The Cross has become such an important symbol for us because Christ was incarnated, He took human form and came and lived among us. He gave his life for us, so that we, that is, all of humanity, could find our way back to Him, back to God. The Cross is what connects earth to heaven. The Cross connects this world to the Kingdom of God. From a symbol of disgrace and criminality, the Cross represents light and salvation. And when we see the Cross, when we come face-to-face with the trial, the scourging, and the Crucifixion of Christ, we do not focus on the darkness or the pain, but we look toward what comes next, we look towards the Resurrection. From the Cross, the light and the joy of the Lord comes to direct our lives.

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

The great paradox of Christian living is that when we greedily try to hold on to the things of this world, we end up losing ourselves. In the process, we risk missing out on eternal life because we have made earthly possessions and pleasures our ultimate treasures. On the other hand, when we center our lives on God, when we endeavor to express our love for Christ and our neighbor in everything we do, then not only do we attain fellowship with the Lord in this life, but we stand to gain eternal life as well. Eternal life makes everything in this temporary life seem minor in comparison. What God has

prepared for those who love Him have neither been seen nor heard (1 Corinthians 2:9).

We practice self-denial, especially during the period of Great Lent, for the sake of the love of God and the Gospel. Therefore, taking up our cross is neither a punishment nor an end in itself, but rather the manner through which we overcome this fallen world in favor of 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 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 Jesus calls us to die to our broken selves so that we can be made new in Him. Let us always remember that even if our cross becomes heavy, we *never* carry it alone. No matter how heavy it is, the Lord is the one who gives us the strength to lift it, and the Lord is the one who knows how heavy a burden we can bear, in order for us to be ultimately led to the Resurrection. The Divine Light of God shines in and through us. 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” – is a reference to the Transfiguration of Christ. Jesus says that some of the disciples surrounding Him would not die before they see the Kingdom of God come with power. Indeed, Peter, John, and James see the Lord manifest His divinity on Mount Tabor. We are also given this opportunity to participate in the Lord’s Glory every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy. We are provided with the possibility of participating in this movement of Christ toward the Father, in full communion with the Holy Spirit. Because communion with God means communion with this intimate fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We further experience the Energy of God through the tremendous resources within the Orthodox spiritual tradition, including the call to pray without ceasing and the practice of the Jesus Prayer.

Bearing a cross is not easy. It involves denying ourselves and our own will and that we prepare to receive Christ. It entails emptying ourselves so we can be filled with the Holy Spirit. We learn to live in *faith*, *hope*, and *love* by taking up our cross and following Him. We help others do the same, as we are all called to reach our potential as persons created in the image and likeness of God. In *faith*, we know He is with us even in trials. In *hope*, we see the Light of the Resurrection shining through the cross. In *love*, we learn that the way to that glory is through humility and service. As we progress to Holy Week and Pascha, let us all carry our cross with joy, placing our trust and confidence in our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ.