



SYNAXIS OF THE THREE HIERARCHS

January 30

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 5:14-19

[The Disciples in the World]

The Lord said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

THE SERMON

Early in Christ's earthly ministry, He went up to a mountain with His disciples. As Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law – what we often refer to as the Ten Commandments – the Lord Jesus went up to a mountain to give us His Law, which is the Law of Love. God had written the Law of Moses on tablets of stone, but now Jesus seeks to write His Law on our hearts, not only as the new Moses but as God the Son Himself, the One who is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

"You are the light of the world," the Lord tells us in this passage. In the preceding



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verses, He explains what it means to be blessed, teaching us that meekness, mercy, and love of righteousness, among other virtues, make for a blessed life. As we develop such virtues through the Grace of the Spirit, we become more like Christ, our everyday lives become more blessed, and we become more of a blessing to others as well. We become the light of the world. This is what the Lord taught His disciples and, by extension, all the faithful. We are called to receive the divine light, walk in the light of the Gospel, and illuminate the world.

Light is a symbol of God in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12). In the Divine Liturgy, before the Gospel is read, we pray, "Shine in our hearts, O Master Who loves mankind, the pure light of Your divine knowledge." When we recite the Creed, we call the Lord Jesus, "Light of Light, true God of true God," and after Communion, we pray, "We have seen the true light." The psalmist (author of a psalm) also prayed, "In Your light we shall see light" (Psalm 35:10).

The Lord unites us to Himself in His love and so we also begin to take on His likeness – and therefore believers are also called "sons of light" (1 Thessalonians 5:5), because "the ways of the righteous shine like a light" (Proverbs 4:17). We are called to "walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8). The Greek word for light is "fos" (φως), and so our Baptism or Christening is called "fotisma" (φώτισμα), that is, our Illumination. We receive the Light of Christ through the Spirit so we can shine in the world, like a bright city on a hill that can be seen for miles, even in the darkest night.

Accordingly, the white clothes we receive after the Baptism are called garments of "fos," or illumined garments (εμφώτια ενδύματα in Greek). At Baptism, we receive a candle that symbolizes the light of Christ, and we are called to live in that light. The Feast of Epiphany is also called "Fota" (Φώτα in Greek) because it was one of the days during which the ancient Church baptized the Catechumens. It was called Φώτα because they were enlightened, clothed in white garments, and they held a candle during their first Liturgy and Holy Communion.

Similarly, on Pascha (Easter), at night, we receive the candlelight from the clergy with the words: "Come receive the Light from the unwaning Light." Also, in icons, the golden background symbolizes the divine light. Gold is the symbol of the divine light and Heaven, and all the Saints are united in the divine light with God.

By receiving the Holy Spirit, we receive Christ and His light, which illuminates us, enlightens us, and makes us bearers of that light to others. The Lord tells us in our passage today, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." As Saint Gregory Palamas says, "When the saints contemplate this divine light . . . then they behold the garment of their deification, their mind being glorified and filled by the grace of the Word . . . just as the divinity of the Word on the mountain glorified with divine light the body conjoined to it."

It is by love and service that we keep His commandment – the Law of Love which fulfills the Law and the Prophets, and is eternal. We also have the example of the Saints and the Fathers of the Church on whose shoulders we stand and in whose steps we also follow. We read this passage on the Feast of the Three Hierarchs – Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom – who worked to spread the light of Christ and illuminate all whom they met. As spiritual beacons in this world, they followed what Christ says in this reading. The Three Hierarchs saw the light, accepted Christ, followed the commandments of the Holy Scriptures, and acted in the spirit of Love.

The Church, in a way, sums up the memory of all the Saints who preached Christ by commemorating these hierarchs, for they were incomparable teachers and preachers, supporting the Church and confirming her in the truth. Monastics also work spiritually to see the divine light with the eyes of their souls. In a humble and ascetic life, full of prayer and contemplation, they empty themselves of worldly desires, and God sanctifies and illuminates them with His light. Then, with His help, they shine that light on the faithful.

This is true of all of us. We are all called to be lights in the world. “Shine, shine O Jerusalem, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1, which we also sing as a hymn on Pascha). When we live by the Law of Love, we reflect the light of Christ in everything we say and everything we do, like a lamp shining in the dark or a shining city on a hill. Our Faith is not merely something we believe, but something we become – it is something that transforms us. To be a Christian means not only to believe in Christ but to become like Him. We bring the light of Christ and the Gospel to the world by living as He did. May we ever be enlightened by the love of God so that we can bring His light to every person around us each day.