

March 18, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



The Sunday of the Holy Cross, March 18, 2012

Kontakion (Tone 7)

*Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of Eden;
It has mysteriously been quenched by the wood of the Cross!
The sting of death and the victory of hell have been vanquished;
For You, O my Savior, have come and cried to those in hell:
"Enter again into paradise."*

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

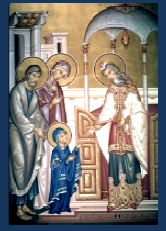
Today, the third Sunday of Great Lent, is called the Sunday of the Holy Cross because there is a special veneration of the Cross which occurs on this day, preparing us for the Crucifixion on Holy and Great Friday. The holy Cross stands in the middle of the church to remind us also to continue our Lenten struggle of fasting and growth and change, in our lives, reminding us also of this verse from Scripture: "He who does not take up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me." (Matt. 10:38)

As you know, every Sunday of Lent has its own theme. The major and over overarching message of this Sunday is, according to Scripture, our belief as Orthodox Christians, that "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:24) is to be found in the Cross of the Lord. Therefore I make bold to say that even if there were no other differences to speak of, this *central dogma* sets us clearly apart from Jews and Muslims and other non-Christians, and even from certain so-called Christian groups that do not treasure the Cross, as well as from sects

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like the Mormons, who openly see the Cross as an emblem of shame. (So much for the modern fascination with ecumenism, for what can we possibly have in common with those who reject the Holy Cross and its power!)

But unlike some Western Christians—I'm thinking here particularly of Roman Catholics, who seem to primarily emphasize the Cross as an emblem of passion and suffering—we Orthodox gaze upon the Cross as a reminder of the joy of salvation and the fact that the Lord consciously and serenely chose to “rest” upon the wood of the Cross by His own will. Of course, we Orthodox do not at all deny that our Lord Jesus Christ did indeed suffer most terribly in the flesh on the Tree of the Cross, but the theme for us on this day, according to the Holy Fathers of the Church, is not the torture His body underwent, but that the Cross has now become the life-giving Tree of Life which was planted in paradise, and as such it is therefore planted right in the very middle of the Lenten pilgrimage—for we are now half way through the Fast--to remind us of how Adam lost Paradise through disobedience and not fasting from the Forbidden Fruit, and how we, on the other hand, may regain it through obedience, fasting, and Christ's glorious Cross.

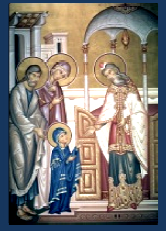
At the beginning of this sermon I quoted this verse from the Gospel of St. Matthew: “He who does not take up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me.” These are the Lord's own words, His instruction to us. They are not to be taken lightly, believe me. Simply put, this means that unless we take up our own personal cross—the afflictions and difficulties in our daily lives, whatever they may be—we are *not* His disciples and are not worthy of Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven opens only to the Cross and to those who are bearing a Cross.

During the sacred season of the Great Fast we are asked, in the words of Scripture, to “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24), and because we have been doing this, the precious and life-giving Cross is now placed before us to refresh our souls and encourage us who may otherwise feel weighed down and oppressed by Lent. The holy Cross makes us think of the Lord's passion and the incredible example He showed us by enduring this suffering for our sake—and this should encourage us to bear up under our own comparatively light sufferings and be comforted. In other words, to a certain degree, we too must experience what the Lord underwent during His passion, for the Cross reminds us that through pain and suffering we shall

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see not only the resurrection of Christ on Pascha, but our own resurrection from sin and from the dead at the end of the ages.

On this day we are also remember that at the foot of the Cross on Calvary there stood Mary, the Mother of Jesus, with the Holy Women of Jerusalem, and St. John the Beloved. And St. John's Gospel testifies that "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." (John 19:25-27) *At this moment, we believe, Jesus Christ gave His all-pure Mother to all of us believers as our own true Mother in the Faith*—and as such is she indeed seen and venerated by all true Orthodox Christians to this very day.

Normally, traditional Orthodox Christians do not make prostrations on Sunday, because Sunday, being the Day of Resurrection, is a day of joy and exultation, not a day of repentance and sorrow, which is what prostrations signify. But on the Sunday of the Precious Cross we do indeed make prostrations before the Holy Cross displayed for our veneration. We do this, however, not in repentance, but in worship of the risen Lord and, as we raise ourselves up from the prostration, we recall the Resurrection of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, let us also remember that the Cross, far from being a sign of shame, is for us a sign of victory, of victory over death, Satan, and hell. Those who do not venerate the Cross clearly do not believe that Christ has won and is winning such a victory for us. When we hear about Muslim mullahs and imams screaming from their pulpits that they will "tear down" our crosses—we know very well what this means! And when we see so-called Christian churches without crosses on their steeples or in their sanctuaries, we know what that means, too, don't we? And we should tremble that such people reject the saving power and message of the Cross, for they shall be judged for it.

But as Orthodox Christians we not only venerate the Cross on this Sunday or on Great and Holy Friday, or a couple of other occasions, but also on every Wednesday and Friday of the year, in the special hymns for those days, when we sing the troparion for the Cross, because on Wednesday Christ was betrayed and sold by Judas, thus beginning the sacred days of His Passion, and on Friday He was crucified. Furthermore, in the matins service for most Sundays, the choir reads and sings the special canons or hymns to the Cross and Resurrection.

Lastly, devout and pious Orthodox believers make the Sign of the Cross many, many times during their daily lives and for every imaginable circumstance, and not just during times of prayer. In this way we invoke the

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saving power of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection by symbolically covering ourselves once again with the shed blood of the spotless Lamb on the Cross.

As we sing in the "Akathist to the Spiritual Ladder, the Precious Cross":

O thou thrice-blessed and all-worshipped Cross of Christ, all we the faithful venerate and magnify thee, being joyous at thy divine Exaltation. But as the trophy and unconquered weapon that thou art, by thy Grace, protect, cover, and shelter those who cry to thee: Rejoice, O Tree most blessed!

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.