



Sunday of St. Thomas, April 22, 2012

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

On this Sunday of St. Thomas we remember the encounter between the Lord Jesus Christ and the famous Doubting Thomas, recalling that St. Thomas, who was not present when the Savior first appeared to His followers, refused to believe that Jesus was truly risen from the dead until he could see him for himself.

Because of his faithlessness and his "show me" attitude, we tend to think of him as an example for unbelievers. But actually I have a surprise for you: *St. Thomas is an example for us believers!*

Why do I say that? Because you and I are not "quite" the believers we like to think we are. We are, in fact, much more like St. Thomas than we perhaps realized before.

Oh yes, we go to church: we recite the Creed, confirming once again with our lips that we "believe". We may say a few prayers at home; we may fast and have some icons. We may even try to be nice people at home, at work, in the neighborhood. (I won't mention whether or not we are nice people when driving down the street or highway, however.)

We "do" all of these things, and we sit back and pat ourselves on the shoulder, congratulating ourselves on being real believers, good Orthodox Christians. But are we? Are we really? Is there anything more, anything *else* that we should be doing if we are to show ourselves true believers and not just "doubting Thomases"?

I propose that there *is* something more; there *is* something else that we must do, and this "something" is found in the Scriptures.

St. John the Baptist, who is the last prophet of the Old Testament, shouted out loudly to all who would listen "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!*" (Matt. 3:2) And then, our Lord Jesus Christ began His public ministry with this same message, these very same words, "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!*" (Matt. 4:17)

I would say, therefore, that the one thing most of us still need to add to our so-called Christian lives is this: repentance. I must tell you honestly that I'm amazed at how little attention is given to this subject in our



churches. When, in fact, was the last time you heard a sermon on repentance? Probably not for a long time; possibly, in fact, never, because repentance, especially in our culture, is not very popular. Yet it is given great importance in Scripture.



First, Christ Himself declared in no uncertain terms that the purpose of His preaching was to call sinners to repentance. In this context He also said that He came to save sinners, not the righteous. Is it not interesting that the words “repent” and “repentance” occur no fewer than 56 times in the New Testament? And we read that after He had completed His earthly life, the Lord’s followers “*went out and preached that people should repent*” (Mark 6:12), for Jesus had told them that without repentance no one would be saved. They didn’t preach that people should have great careers and lots of money, or nice clothes and houses and cars, as some Protestant preachers say these days. No, they should *repent*.

Many of us think that repentance is just about being sorry for our sins. It’s not! It’s much more than this. Remember, even Judas expressed sorrow for what he had done when he said “*I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.*” (Matt. 27:3,4) In other words he felt guilty and he was sorry, but in fact he never truly repented.

True believers in Jesus Christ, however, learn how to repent. They learn what repentance really is, and THEN THEY DO IT!

We know that God the Holy Trinity lives in relationship to Himself—that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in a relationship of love and essential oneness with each other. Similarly, God wishes to have a relationship of love with us, and us with him. True repentance only makes sense in this specific context: a relationship. This relationship is not only with God, but also sometimes with other people, and always it must be governed by love, if it is to be a true relationship and one in which repentance can occur. This is why only Christianity knows about, believes in, and experiences forgiveness, because it can only exist in a relationship with a personal God.

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



But the fact of the matter is that most of us spend a majority if not all of our time “away” from God and not at all in a loving and repentant relationship with Him. This is why I suggested that we are not really believers in a full sense and that today’s saint, “Doubting Thomas” is just as much for us as he is for non-Christians.

Therefore, repentance means coming “back” to God and refusing to stay “away” from Him any longer. We may feel real regret or sorrow about our sins and tell ourselves that we won’t do them again, but if we don’t actually come *back* to God it’s not real repentance; there’s been no change. *Nothing is healed; nothing forgiven.* And this is a dreadful state to be in; a terrifying state, actually, for what if we *die* in this state?

Coming back to God and ceasing to be “away” from Him means letting Him be in charge of our lives instead of our own egos trying to run everything. It means letting Him have *His* say. And where do we find “*His* say”? In the Scriptures, of course. This is why it’s so critical to read Holy Scripture, at least a small amount, every single day—for here we find the words of life, here we find God’s own “say”, *His* will for us, rather than our own. This is the only way we can find and adopt God’s viewpoint of the world and life. It is the way in which we begin to acquire an Orthodox world-view, in addition to going to church, worthily receiving the sacraments, and so on.

Brothers and sisters, each of us should be able to say, from the bottom of our hearts and with all of the honesty, integrity, and truth that we can possibly muster: “The hardest thing I have to do each day is follow God’s will rather than my own.” If we cannot say this, then we are not following His will. If we are not following His will, then we are not repenting, and if we are not repenting, then we are not truly His followers and therefore we are not believers and we are worse than St. Thomas was before he finally confessed his belief.

We do not want to be among those that draw near to Christ with our lips—that is, with our words—and yet not be found among the sheep at His right hand at the Last Judgment. But there is a true danger of this, an actual risk, if we don’t wake from the slumber of our rather unspiritual lives.

More than once in Scripture we hear people cry out to the Lord: “*Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!*” (Mark 9:23)

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One of my favorite passages in the New Testament is the one which tells of the Savior walking on the water during a storm, out to the ship on which His disciples are cowering in fear because of the thunder, lightning and huge waves. Suddenly they see Him coming towards them over the raging Sea of Galilee and they, not understanding and thinking it is a ghost, cry out with fear. But Jesus says to them “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”

This can be one of the most consoling verses in Scripture for those of us who are “away” from God and not yet really being numbered among His true followers. By reading and studying the magnificent and perfect character and personality of the God-Man, Jesus the Christ, and Him crucified and risen, we can learn His will for us and begin to turn back to Him, bridging the gap that separates us and our lives from Him. Then we will begin to hear—at first faintly, almost a whisper, and then louder and louder as we draw nearer to Him—“It is I; be not afraid.” *It is I...*

And then at last we will understand the words our Savior spoke to St. Thomas on this day so long ago when He said to him: “You have believed because you have seen [Me]; blessed are those who, not having seen, yet believe.” That, brothers and sisters, will be you and me!

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