

August 5, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



Epistle Reading: I Corinthians 3:9-17

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-34

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

This morning I want to say a few words about both the Epistle and the Gospel appointed for today's Divine Liturgy. First, the Epistle reading, from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

This reading builds on last Sunday's reading from the same Epistle and is a direct continuation of that Epistle. Last week St. Paul first spoke about the need to avoid divisions and factions in the Church by keeping our attention focused on Christ rather than secondary things or non-essentials.

Now, in today's reading, he reminds us that we are "co-workers" with God. CO-workers, mind you. This implies a very special and important relationship. Quite plainly, it means that God's work in this world, His plan of salvation for us, cannot go forward without our *active* participation and cooperation. We cannot be passive here in this life because, as St. Paul continues, we have been given God's grace to *do* this work. But, he says sternly, the only foundation for this work is Jesus Christ Himself, not some other person, not some patriarch or bishop or pope or priest, but only the Son of God Himself. And further, only if our work is done on *this* foundation will it grow, prosper, and survive.

But among us Orthodox in this country this has really not been what we've been doing, as is self-evident but just looking around at how poorly we've grown and the very few saints we've been able to produce over almost two centuries of Orthodox presence on this continent. Oh, we've been busy, all right, but we've busied our puny little minds with grave and sober concerns about which *foreign* language to preserve in our divine services, over our ethnic identities, customs, traditions (with a small "t", mind your), our jurisdictional squabbles and our proud posturing as heirs of "glorious" (but long since defunct) Byzantium or Imperial Russia, or whatever other non-essential you can think of --in fact, almost anything but repentance and genuine life in Christ.

In many, many ways we have not answered the Gospel call of Christ, even though it's been proclaimed in every Divine Liturgy here for two centuries.

Keeping this essential message in mind—that *Christ Himself* is the reason for everything and we must be working *with* Him, as co-workers, and not against Him--, let's move on now to look at this morning's Gospel, in which we heard the astonishing account of Christ walking on the sea. (I must tell you; this has always been my favorite Gospel narrative, often giving me comfort and consolation in times of personal difficulty, loss, and anxiety.)



Jesus comes out to the disciples in their boat, walking on the surface of the water and, seeing this, they are understandably terrified, thinking it must be a ghost. “But Jesus said unto them: ‘Fear not, it is I.’”

Brothers and sisters, how often, in the midst of the dark night, in the middle of life’s sometimes very fierce storms, we forget that Christ is still there and reassuring us that it is indeed He, coming to us *precisely through these storms*, and therefore we should not be afraid?

St. Peter recognized the Master and then said, “Lord, if it is Thee, bid me come to you on Thee on the water.” And Christ said, “Come.”

“Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me! Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘Oh you of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’ And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, ‘Truly Thou art the Son of God.’”

What an account; what a miracle! But the main point actually isn’t just the Lord walking on the water and telling them not to be afraid. The main point is that as long as Peter kept his eyes, his “focus” in other words, on Christ, he too could walk safely through the storm on the water. But the moment he took his gaze away from the Lord and became aware of the wind and the waves he began to sink.

And so it is with us. Most of us manage, without any difficulty whatsoever, to take our eyes off Christ each and every day so that, when the storms of life come, we start to sink. The lesson here is clear and explicit and dramatic.

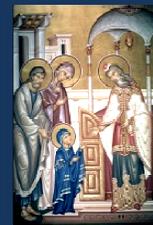
But note also how this Gospel reading links into the Epistle we just heard this morning, which in turn is connected to the Epistle from last Sunday. All of this has to do with keeping our eyes “on the prize” as it were—the Pearl of Great Price, our Savior and Redeemer who, *alone*, can prevent divisions and factions and quarrels in the Church and also help us to walk boldly and safely through the storms of life.

Human life is a sea, an ocean, you see—and so the Holy Fathers have also taught us. And just as in the physical world, great storms can occur on the sea of life. We’ve all experienced them at one time or another; some of us have gone through more than one storm, and probably will have to weather others, still to come, perhaps even worse ones, both in the Church, in the country, and in our own private lives. Those who safely sail through the storms of this world’s oceans do so on great ocean liners. Those who safely sail through the storms of life do so *on the Ark of the Church*, which is the fulfillment of the Ark of Noah, the Old Testament “type” or foreshadowing of the Church, as St. Peter says in an epistle.

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And just as an ocean liner has a destination, a port of call, so too do we, Orthodox Christians, have a destination: the Kingdom of Heaven. May all of us, by keeping our gaze steadfastly fixed on the light-giving face of the Lord, and remaining on the safe Ark of Christ's Church, make it safely into this port of call!

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