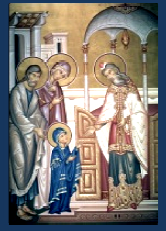


June 10, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



Matthew 10:32-33; 37-38; 19:27-30

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

The first Sunday after Pentecost is always called the Sunday of all Saints. This is because the first fruit of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church—that is, upon the apostles, the disciples, and the Theotokos gathered together in the Upper Room in Jerusalem—is *holiness* and the possibility that every single one of us can achieve, through God's saving grace and our own willing efforts, *sanctity*, for we *all* called to sainthood. And sainthood simply means living faithfully together with Jesus Christ already *now*, in this life, and then forever and ever with Him after we die.

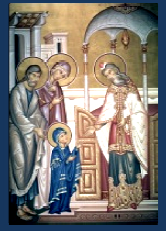
It's not a coincidence then that the Holy Church appoints for the Gospel reading on this Sunday the one we have just heard, from St. Matthew, which begins with these significant words:

"The Lord said to His disciples: Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My father Which is in heaven."

This opening verse is something that should cause us to pause and think, for here the Lord Jesus Christ is saying that anyone who denies Him will also be denied by God the Father, who is in Heaven, and will, therefore, lose his salvation. Christ is not talking about just converting, or not converting, to Christianity. Nor is He talking about mentioning to others that we happen to be Orthodox Christians with a firm belief in the Trinity and the salvation won for us by the Lord Jesus. He's actually speaking about something much more than this, and that's why this Gospel has been appointed for the Sunday of All the Saints.

St. John Chrysostom tells us that in this verse alone "Christ spurs His disciples on to suffer; He prepares their hearts and disposes them to disregard all the cruel evils which were to befall them: cares, humiliations, attacks and all other afflictions, trials and woes; moreover, He bids them to despise even death; He teaches them and strengthens them..."

You might think that this was directed only to the first generation of Christians, almost all of whom would indeed be martyred. But if you think this, you are quite wrong. The Lord was speaking to them, of course, but He was also speaking to all those who would come after, all the way up to and including our own generation and those who come after us!



Now, let's back up for a moment: I've never met a single human being, Christian or not, atheist, Buddhist, or whatever, that hasn't had many "cruel evils" of one kind or another befall them. Life is tough; not just for followers of Christ but for anyone, everyone. But the Lord told us that we should not expect this life to be a bed of roses—or, rather, there *are* roses in this life, but they hide painful thorns, and these thorns are the lot of all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We must expect to be pricked and bleed and suffer scars from these thorns.

What sets us apart from non-Christians, however, is that we have been taught by Christ to actually learn how to "*disregard...all cares, humiliations, attacks and other afflictions, trials and woes.*" We have been taught to rise above them and not let them drag us down into insensible discouragement, bitterness, or even despair. We have even been taught, as St. John Chrysostom said, to despise and rise above the fact of death itself. Thus, the Lord continued in the next verse:

"Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul." And then: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves."

These stark words tells us that Christ sends us—each and every one of us who confesses Him as Lord and wants to follow Him—out into a dangerous world where there will be many challenges to our Faith in Him. He does not send us into a safe life, filled with pleasures, but into danger, and so He adds:

"Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."

In other words Jesus Christ does not want us to be stupid people, uneducated and unable to defend our faith. He wants us to be spiritually wise enough to figure out how to live nobly and with decency and integrity and also *survive* and even, if possible, prosper among our enemies, whoever they may be and wherever they may be, and whatever form they may take. St. John explained it thus:

*"Just as the serpent allows its whole body to be beaten, while guarding its head as much as possible and striving to keep it safe in every way, so also let a Christian surrender all that he has—money, possessions, and honor—and even surrender his body [if necessary] to be wounded, but with all his strength *let him guard his head*, which is Christ..."*

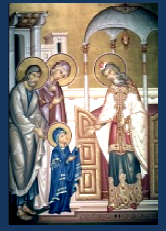
Now, how does this apply, practically speaking, to us Orthodox Christians living here in our still relatively free, easy going, and comfortable American culture and society? What is the application? At the moment,

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it seems that we are not being led to martyrdom *per se*, though if we are really conscious Orthodox Christians we are aware that we are becoming more and more psychologically isolated from the dominant culture with each passing year. The fact is that the anti-Christian atmosphere around us is growing, but this means that there are also be increasing opportunities for all of us to quietly bear our witness—whether in the family or in the workplace—to goodness and decency and to our conviction that Christ is Lord. In this way we actively, though quietly, “acknowledge” Him, as He says we must if we wish to be saved. In this way we carry our little candles into the dark rooms of others.

For too long Christians have bought into the myth of “Jesus, meek and mild,” the sweet and gentle man who would never harm a fly and loves everyone unconditionally (well, He *does* love everyone, but He doesn’t love our sins!). We have somehow accepted the false idea that we can let others walk all over us, over our ideals and morals, over our religion, and over our God. Yes, we have!

Look—it’s going on all around us, on TV, in the movies, in the culture as a whole—and we’ve done precious little to stop it. We have forgotten that although Christ calls us to be martyrs for His sake, He does not expect us to be the victims of others around us who are immoral and abusive.

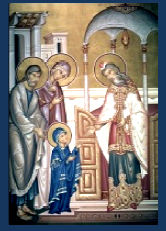
It’s time for us to remember that the Lord said *this*:

“Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.”

Why do we rarely, or never, hear sermons about this?

In other words, it’s time for all of us to toughen up and “man up”, as they say, and stop being pushovers. We must start bearing our witness.

St. John Chrysostom said, commenting on the verse I just read: “If we have made peace with the destruction of truth, it is most sinful and inappropriate. Christ did not come to bring such a peace, but rather its opposite... Unity is good; [but] there are occasions when contention and separation are actually great and divine deeds [when they are in the service of truth]. Thus, one should not be joined in love with the wicked or be at peace with them. Even,” St. John continues, “even if father or mother, child or brother be found in opposition to the law of Christ, we should resist them as enemies of the truth.”



And "What is the truth?" as Pontius Pilate said to Christ. You and I, brothers and sisters, we know the answer to this question, for Christ Himself told us when He said, *unequivocally*: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." And this is the same witness that we must quietly bear in our lives today, not allowing anyone or anything to come between us and the One who is the Truth, and not allowing anyone else to deny that He is the Truth, either.

Yet, how many times have we heard—perhaps at the workplace or in a social situation where we aren't necessarily with other Orthodox Christians—where we have heard someone say about religion: "Oh, you know, I believe it's basically all the same, whether one is a Buddhist, a Christian, or whatever. It's what's in your heart that counts."... How many times have we heard this, or a variation of it, and kept silent or changed the subject? Have we forgotten that the Lord said nothing at all even remotely resembling this?

And when we were silent, we actually denied the Truth, and that means we denied Christ. And why? Because we didn't want to cause offense or upset someone or provoke them to dislike us—all of the kinds of things that the Lord Jesus Christ said in today's Gospel we should actually be *expecting* from the "wolves" around us. We have become "man-pleasers" rather than "God-pleasers." And believe me, those who do not believe in Christ, *are* truly wolves—as St. John the Evangelist said: "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. *These are deceivers and an antichrist.*" (II John 1:7) Yes, St. John tells us that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ actually partake of the antichrist and are preparing the way for him!

There is a very popular heresy roaming through the minds of men today. It's called "perennialism." It was given an intellectual and "learned" voice by Aldous Huxley in 1945 when he wrote his book—still in print today, by the way—called "The Perennial Philosophy". Basically this is the idea that all religions and all gods are the same and you can pick and choose whichever one you want because each religion is going to lead you to the same place. So it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. We hear this in the media, in our schools, and tragically, even in some churches today. This is a denial of objective truth. It is a denial of Revelation. It is a denial of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and Him crucified and risen!

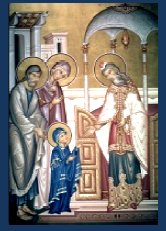
The Lord continued, in this morning's Gospel:

"He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after Me, is not worthy of Me."

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About this hard and perhaps shocking verse, St. John Chrysostom said the following, and we must listen well:

“If any man is not willing to renounce his life and to give himself over to battles, struggles, self-sacrifice, the shedding of his blood and even a violent and shameful death for Christ’s sake, he is unworthy to be His disciple or His servant....He who does not follow our great God and Savior Jesus Christ is driven out of the kingdom and condemned to everlasting flames...”

This is an important part of the meaning of Pentecost and of the Sunday of all the Saints. For this is what the saints of all times, places, and ages understood, embraced and lived, without excuses and without hesitation, not putting anything off to another day, or until retirement. They did this because they were *the very first fruits of the descent of the Holy Spirit* on the Church on that first Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit inspired them and gave them the strength to do what seem to us incredible, magnificent, heroic, and courageous things. You and I, brothers and sisters, have also received the same Holy Spirit and His gifts, *the very same Holy Spirit that those disciples received.*

So what is holding us back? What is our problem? When will we start? When will we make a beginning?

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