

Gal. 2:16-20

Mark 8:34-38

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

Today is the Sunday after the Feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross, and so the Epistle and Gospel appointed for this day, which we have just heard, deal with the theme of the Cross and its place in our own personal spiritual lives.

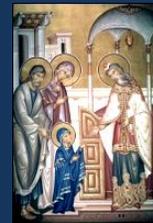
The Epistle began with these words: “Man is not justified by the works of the law but by *faith in Jesus Christ*.” In other words, what makes us “okay” in the eyes of God is not the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, but something else. And this same verse tells us what that “something else” is: “Man is not justified by the works of the law but by *faith in Jesus Christ*”—in other words it is our belief in Christ and His saving work of redemption that makes us “okay” before the eyes of God.

“Belief” means that we know Jesus was an historic figure that actually lived and taught two thousand years ago, and further that He died and rose from the dead and ascended bodily into Heaven. Belief also means that we accept without question the Lord’s own words about Himself: that He is the Son of God and that He and the Father are One. Later in this Epistle reading we find this significant line: “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.*”

This is a very important verse in terms of Orthodox Christian spirituality. It tells us that in some mysterious way we must *die* so that Christ may live within us.

How do we do this? First through Baptism, for in the waters of Holy Baptism we put to death the old man. Secondly, by living an Orthodox way of life and participating in the life of Christ through the sacraments or Holy Mysteries of the Church—an essential part of living in Christ and His life-giving and strengthening grace.

But it also means something else, something that often gets left out of the thinking of the average Orthodox believer. It means that we must *die to our own sins*, to our own self-will, and that we must pick



up our cross of sufferings and difficulties in life, whatever that may be, and carry this cross without complaining or murmuring. In all these ways we become “crucified in Christ” and die to our own egoism, so that Christ can live in us.

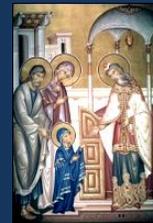
This is amplified by the Gospel appointed for this morning, wherein the Lord said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Followed by this explanation: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

Now, some might respond to this by saying, “Well, I don’t want to “gain the whole world”! I don’t want to be powerful and wealthy. I’m not ambitious or greedy or grasping. But the Holy Fathers tell us that the Lord’s teaching is about more than power and wealth. It’s also about self-centeredness and ego, of being full of oneself. Yes, perhaps it’s true that we don’t really want to be powerful or wealthy, but who among us is not so opinionated and full of himself that no room has been left for God within our hearts?—or, what room that has been left is very small and cramped.

But the Lord added: “What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” He is saying very plainly here that it’s possible, whether we mean to do it or not or are even conscious of it, that we can trade our very soul for our self-centeredness, our opinionatedness, our egoism! You see, we mistake our ego for the real self. But the ego is a false self. It is not who we really are. Yet that’s all that many of us know.

Brothers and sisters, so much of what we read in the Holy Fathers and in the lives of the saints deals with this very issue: how do we die to ourselves so that Christ may live in us? How do we shed the false self and uncover the real self?

Of course literal and complete obedience to the teachings of Christ, the commandments of Scripture and the commandments of the Church are necessary, as well as all the rest. But as I said, it’s quite easy to do all of the external things—and even do them very well!—and yet continue right along with our own sense of self-righteousness, bossiness and busy-bodyness, expressing our opinions about anything and everything whether we’ve been asked to or not, trying to manipulate and control others, and in general pampering ourselves and excusing ourselves while at the same time being hard on others.



These are the kinds of behaviors that show that we have not at all picked up our own cross—the cross of our own difficult personality—and have not even *begun* to put our egotism to death, and that, far from throwing off the false self, we have instead empowered it and made it into a kind of spiritual monster. This is a struggle. It is not easy. But we must at least make a beginning.

The Holy Fathers teach us that the Orthodox Church is a hospital for sick souls. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos has written several books about this. Therefore the practice of Orthodox spirituality is itself a therapeutic or healing practice. And one of the therapeutic means by which we begin to excise the suppurating tumor of our egotism is by taking Christ Himself as our guide and model for how to live each day. A great bishop of the Orthodox Church, St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, who lived two hundred years ago, wrote about it in this way:

“In order to correct yourself and become a true Christian, that is Christ’s, set the holy life of Christ before the eyes of your soul, and look upon it often and imitate its example. And even though your heart, corrupt as it is, does not wish it, force and convince yourself to imitate the beautiful virtues of Christ.”

St. Tikhon continues:

“You look into a mirror so that you may know what is in your face, whether there are any blemishes in it, and having seen blemishes, you cleanse them. Let the immaculate life of Christ be a mirror to your soul, look into it often and know what is in our soul. Does it desire the same things that Christ desires? And does it do what Christ did when He lived on earth? And in it you will see what is contrary to the life of Christ, and you will cleanse it all like blemishes with repentance and contrition of heart. Christ the Lord despised honor, glory, and riches in this world, though He was able to have everything as the Master of all. Do *you* not seek honor, riches, and glory in this world?

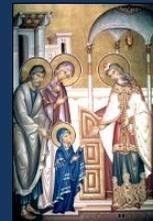
St. Tikhon then expands upon this: “Christ lived on earth in humility. Do *you* not live in pride and pomp? Christ was loving and compassionate. Do *you* not hate and harbor malice against men like yourselves? Christ, being reproached, reproached no one. Do *you* not reproach anyone that in any way reproaches you; and worse than that, do you not reproach him who in no way reproaches you?...

September 16, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young

Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



“Christ was meek to all His revilers. Do you not revile those that revile you? Christ got revenge against no one, though He was able to destroy all His enemies in the wink of an eye. Do you not get revenge for any offense against you? Christ endured all things. Do you not complain and curse in any misfortune and suffering that comes your way?”

“So,” St. Tikhon adds, “compare *your* soul with the life of Christ; and as you set your face before a mirror, set your soul before the mirror of the immaculate life of Christ, and take every care to correct and go after whatever you may see that is opposed to it. If you do so, then I assure you, that day by day you will become better, for it is impossible for him who looks often into that immaculate mirror not to correct himself.”

There is no better way for me to end than with these concluding words of St. Tikhon:

“Consider these words carefully,” he advises, “and you will know and acknowledge to yourself that whoever wishes to be saved and enter into Christ’s Heavenly Kingdom *must follow Him*... There is no other way there...”

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us heed well the words of this morning’s Epistle and Gospel, and these words by a great saint of the Church. Let us heed well, pick up our crosses, and follow Christ—that is, following His example—straight into the Kingdom of Heaven.

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