

September 11,
2011

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday before The Holy Cross

"The Cross is the guardian of the whole earth; the Cross is the beauty of the Church. The Cross is the strength of kings; the Cross is the support of the faithful. The Cross is the glory of angels and the terror of demons."

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

Today's Gospel reading, on this Sunday before the great Feast of the Exultation of the Cross (on Wednesday), is a very short one, but we mustn't be misled by its brevity, for it is incredibly rich and central to our faith as followers of Jesus Christ. It speaks to us of the Cross of Christ.

Those of you who have watched sports games on TV or attended them in person have probably, at one time or another, noticed that someone was holding a simple hand-lettered sign which reads "John 3:16'. Or you might have seen it on a bumper sticker or a billboard. I think that, here in America at least, it's probably the most famous single verse from all of the Bible: ["For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life."](#)

This speaks to us of God's love for us, lost sinners though we were, for He sent His Son to us, and that Son died horribly on a cross of execution, taking upon Himself all the sins of the world that had been committed up to that day, and all the sins that would ever be committed from then to the end of time.

I can't imagine a Christian home that does not have a cross, or perhaps even many crosses, whether that be an Orthodox home or a non-Orthodox home. More and more today, in this post-Christian and neo-pagan culture of ours, our love for the Lord's cross is puzzling to many because they see it as the most horrifying instrument of death ever devised. The Jewish historian Josephus writing very shortly after the time of Christ called crucifixion "the most wretched of deaths." The Roman philosopher Cicero said, "it is altogether so disgusting and shameful that Romans and Greeks should not even speak of it because it is not fit for good, decent people to even mention it. It is unsuitable for polite conversation." Perhaps this is the reason why some so-called Christian groups do not show the cross on their churches or in their temples of worship? It is also significant that some non-Christian sects, like the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, do not make use of the cross, either, much less venerate it. According to Jewish law at the time of Christ, anyone who was crucified died under the curse of God. And yet, brothers and sisters, the Lord Jesus submitted Himself to this execution.

The simple fact is that the cross is the way He chose to die the death we—you and I--should have died, paying the price we should have paid. It is so easy to forget this in the rush and hurry of everyday life, and the bustle and worry and noisiness of life as it has become in our society.

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AS ARCHBISHOP STYLIANOS OF AUSTRALIA HAS SAID IN A SERMON FOR THIS SUNDAY:

“Jesus sums it up entirely in [this Gospel reading]...: God's love for us; God loving us so much that He sends His Son for us; our faith, or belief, in the Son; and our guaranteed eternal existence because of God's love, because Jesus has come, and because of our faith in Him. This small but important passage is the essence of our faith. If someone who had never in their life heard of Christianity, what we believe, what we practice, etc., this [verse] would be the primary passage which would illustrate everything about God, about us, and about our salvation.”

This is why St. Paul said, in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (2: 2): [“For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”](#)

Can we think for just a moment how very differently our own lives would be if we could say, and make it be true, that we are not going to “know anything...save Jesus Christ and Him crucified”?...

This is an opportunity I can't pass up to tell you something about an interesting and a curious verse in the famous Psalm 23 (4): “Thy rod and Thy staff, they have comforted me.”

Have you ever wondered about it, what it means? Not surprisingly, the Holy Fathers of the Church tell us. The *rod* is actually the Cross of Christ Himself, and it is intended to be a great comfort to us, something to which we often look, gazing with love and compunction upon the Crucified One, and also something that we sign ourselves with when we make the Sign of the Cross. It also signifies our own afflictions and trials in life. That's the *rod*.

Now, what about the *staff*? Remember, the verse says, “Thy rod and Thy *staff*, they have comforted me.” Again, the Church Fathers explain this to us: the staff is the Jesus Prayer! St. Ambrose of Optina (+1891) wrote about this. So the Cross of Christ and the Jesus Prayer are to be our constant comfort and accompaniment all during the sometimes long and heavy sojourn of our lives. We must never be without it, and that's why we wear a cross around our necks. Because Christ saved us through the Cross and crucifixion, the gates of Heaven open only to the Cross, they open to those who are carrying a Cross, who are signed with the Cross, who are *bearing* a cross, the cross of their own life.

We live today in a society where the Cross is as good as spat upon. Soon we will likely see it actually being spat upon, in public, just as the mob jeered and spat upon the holy Face of Christ as He carried His cross to Golgotha. And we've already heard about so-called artists—funded by *our* tax dollars, and whose works are displayed in art museums also funded by *our* tax dollars—so-called artists who present a cross or crucifix in a see-through vat of their own urine, or more recently, a crucifix crawling with

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ants. Is this not blasphemy? *It is indeed.* And not only blasphemy but a complete rejection of Christ and the salvation that He so painfully earned for us on that “cross on a hill far away.”

My old Granny, who died at the age of 97 and grew up with veterans of the Civil War, was raised as a kind of generic Christian—more Baptist or Congregationalist than anything else--on a farm in the vast wheat lands of central Washington state. She was already a young lady at the turn of the new century, in 1900. Her parents were pioneers who had come across from Missouri in covered wagons. She loved the cross, embraced it over and over in the many struggles and heartbreaks of her own life, including losing one of her sons in the Second World War (who was also my father), and was consoled by the cross, and she loved above all the Precious One who shed His blood on that Cross. I tell you truly, there was never a time when I didn't hear her singing softly, while washing dishes or cooking, her favorite old hymn:

“On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame; and I love that old cross where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain.”

“So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown.”

Because she loved this hymn so much, it was sung at her funeral.

Can we, may we, Orthodox Christians of today, have even just a bit of the piety and devotion to the Cross of that old lady?

In the words of one of the Orthodox hymns for this approaching Feast of the Cross:

“Thou Wood famous in song, O Cross on which Christ was outstretched, the whirling sword that guarded Eden was afraid of thee; and the dread cherubim gave way before Christ who was crucified upon thee, granting peace unto our souls.”

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