

3-31-19 Sunday of the Cross

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

We have a wonderful blessing today, in that Father Damaskinos in coming and visiting us has brought us to venerate a relic of the true cross. It was given to his bishop by one of the bishops of Jerusalem. For obvious reasons, in the traditions of the Jerusalem church, the cross is highly esteemed.

We should all highly esteem the cross. We should all love the cross, but because it is the place where Christ was crucified, it is the place where the cross was rediscovered, after it had been lost, there is, I think it is fair to say, no place on earth where it is held in greater honor, closer to the heart, remembered always, always. It's an incredible blessing, a very, very rare blessing, among the various relics of the church and the relics of the saints that we would have a very tiny splinter of the cross of Christ in our midst. Let that be something that is warming your heart this morning and something that begins a particular theme of this week.

In many places, this entire week is called the Cross Week or the Week of the Cross. Often, we forget, as is the tradition of the church, that it was on this week in Lent, when Helen discovered successfully the cross in Jerusalem. After Constantine had freed the church, restored Christianity, freed it from persecution, after a number of years went by, and the empire was stabilized, reunited, having been divided for many years into different areas under different emperors, the zeal of God came upon the church, and it became a desire to go to the Holy Land and to recover the holy places.

Many of them had been built over. There was a Roman, a pagan, temple built on the very place where the cross of Christ had been for centuries believed to be. It was a place that the Christians never forgot. We have to remember, as Westerners, and many of us new people to the Orthodox faith, that there have been Christians in the Holy Land since Pentecost. They have never left.

In the memory of the church, they did not forget where the salvific events of Christ took place. They did not forget where He was born. They did not forget where He was jailed, or where He was crucified, or where He was buried and rose from the dead. They did not forget even where it was customary to throw the crosses away after a crucifixion, because that wood became unclean, cursed wood, wood that took the life of a man.

When Saint Helen gets there with the great company of workers, they went to that place that the church had known for centuries, for three centuries, that it was where the cross was buried. Basil grew there. This incredible herb with the name of the king. The Romans had built a temple there. I believe it was a temple to Jupiter. She had it torn down, and we know the story, which is celebrated at other times of the year. They found the cross of Christ.

They actually found multiple crosses, and they took them individually and started laying them on people, and those people were healed, including a person that was dead, in his coffin, being processed from his funeral to the graveyard where he was going to be buried. When they placed the third of the crosses that they had found on him, he came to life again. It occurred at this time, during Lent. Often the commentators on this Sunday of Lent, which I have emphasized

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much in the past that we are given the cross in the middle of Lent to rest under its shadow, to be rejuvenated, to recommit to the Lenten journey, to remember the victory that we are going to celebrate at Pascha, the victorious cross of Christ, but we must not forget, also, that it was this time of year when the cross was recovered and restored to the church.

In encountering the cross of Christ, it's amazing how personal it becomes and how much like Christ the cross is itself. One of the things I love to realize, to recognize, or to notice when we start singing to the cross, last night and this morning, is that we are singing to the cross. We're not singing about the cross. We don't even say Your cross, to Christ, does all of these wonderful things. We say, "O cross of Christ, you did these things. You held up the Savior of our souls. His life was given on you. You were sanctified by Him giving up His life upon you." We actually talk and pray and sing to the cross itself.

That should be a comfort level that we have. I think, for many of us, we still think of the cross as an inanimate object, a symbol, and yet everything we know is alive in Christ. The cross is wood, but it is sanctified wood, sanctified by God Himself, the instrument of the ultimate sacrifice that opens the doors to Heaven, that conquers death, that invites us to return to paradise to reverse the effects of the fall that have come upon us.

When you pray, remember to pray to the cross. When you make the sign of the cross upon yourself, remember that the cross mystically in Christ has a consciousness of its own. If we did not believe that, we would not pray to the cross itself. It is alive in Christ. We find that when the cross is brought into our life, at first we encounter it as this ... a bit of a terror. There's a bit of the remnant of the cross being something scary, when we first encounter the cross of Christ.

We might hear the story of Christ being crucified. We might realize that, at the time, the cross was an instrument of death, of capital punishment. We might come to a degree of faith in Christ as our Savior, but when we hear His words about the cross, it's immediately sacrificial for us, as well. We do not believe in a Christ who came and did everything for us, so that we wouldn't have to do it. That is a conviction, really ultimately a heresy, that grew in those who considered themselves Christians in the world, but they lost the truth.

Christ did not come and do everything He did so that we would not have to. He did not sacrifice Himself, so that we don't have to sacrifice ourselves. He did not die and defeat death, so that we didn't have to encounter death. He did not work miracles, so that we could simply watch and observe.

He calls us to be like Him. He calls us to imitate Him. He calls us to do everything, everything, as a human being that He set an example for. We know this quite clearly when we encounter His words about the cross, when He is talking to the multitudes and His disciples, and He says to them, "If any of you would come after me," that's what it means to be a Christian, to follow Christ, to imitate Him, to go after Him, to want to be in His company. "If any of you would come after me," what is the first thing we have to do? We have to deny ourselves and take up our own cross and follow after Him. "For whoever would save his own life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will save it."

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We encounter the cross of Christ immediately again as a terror to our own ego, a threat to our own identity, the god that we have created of ourselves, or the image of God that we have created. Him, having created us in His image, we in turn, in our fallenness, create Him in our image. We eclectically gather together the image of God, the identity that we create in our own mind as to who He is, and He is often created in a way that accommodates all of our weaknesses and stresses all of our strengths.

We like a God that is like us, but that's a false god. We will not encounter the true Christ unless, like Him, we take up our own cross, and we follow after Him, and like He lost His life for His Father, we lose our life for Him, that we might have a true God and a true life. We find that the cross, although it is terrorizing when we first encounter it, when we become comfortable with it resting on our back, when we become accustomed to the discomfort and the labor of carrying it with us, being Christians, being like Christ, doing what He did, we start to realize that it brings incredible joy and comfort into our life.

The cross ends up becoming a companion to us that we can wield at all times, as a blessing for healing and even as a weapon, literally, against sin and evil, the devil and the demons. We find that we encounter the cross as a blessing first. We use it in every aspect of our life. We make the sign of the cross upon ourselves. We decorate everything Christian with a cross. We are exhorted to bless our food, to bless our cars, to bless our pets, to bless our homework. When we make the sign of the cross, it brings mystically the reality and the power and the presence of the cross itself into the things that we are encountering in our life. Why would we not bless everything?

There's a wonderful note by an Orthodox nun, an anonymous note. She's writing a letter to one of her spiritual children, and she says, "An Orthodox believer crosses himself with a brief silent prayer before work; before study; before traveling; before entering a church; when passing a cemetery, a church, or a roadside shrine. He makes the sign of the cross over his door as he leaves his house, over his bed before going to sleep at night, over an important letter before he mails it, over his medicine before taking it. For him, a prayerful cross is not something confined to Sunday worship alone. He is well aware of the tremendous power of our great enemy, the devil, who attacks us unceasingly. Christ left us an invincible weapon against him, and it is the cross, so the sign of the cross is made against danger, against fear, as a protection against the wiles of the devil, and when beseeching God for His help and His mercy and forgiveness, and His granting the answers to our prayers."

I love this quote from Saint Theognostos of the Philokalia, where he says you can even make the sign of the cross with your entire body. He says, "When you are energized by divine grace, and you find yourself full of tears, in love and prayer before God, lie on the ground, with your arms outstretched in the form of the cross; beat the earth with your forehead; and ask Him for deliverance from sin." And we think we're wild. I feel good about myself when I'm driving down the highway, and I just don't care that there's other people around me looking at me when I make the sign of the cross, very valiant of me. Yet, we're supposed to be making the cross all of the time in everything, blessing everything that we encounter in our life, even in our prayers, even making our entire body the shape of the cross.

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I've told you before, but I used to, as a teenager, have the wonderful habit of spending time with friends late at night at the bottom of the hill that I lived on. We had a tradition of watching monster movies together. I like scary movies, but every time I had to walk home alone, I was terrified. I had this long, long, steep hill, no streetlights at all. You left the last streetlight down on the highway, and then you had to make it all the way up to the top of my hill. I think there was a streetlight by the elementary school at the top. It was this long, dark hall of darkness, with berry bushes and things coming over both sides of the road. It was very terrifying.

There were usually werewolves in the bushes or vampires. Zombies back then were slow, so they weren't that scary. I would ... This is not spiritual. This is fear induced. This is not great faith, but terror. Going up that hill sometimes ... Sometimes I could make it without doing this, but often, going up that hill in the dark, out of sheer desire to survive, I would put my hands out in the form of a cross and walk up the road, hoping that whatever evil was hiding in the bushes would be defeated. Now, it's a very immature, fear-based thing to do. It wasn't very spiritual, but there was something inside of me, growing up in a Christian home, that knew that there was power there. Technically, actually we weren't even Orthodox canonically at that time.

The cross is a blessing and a protection and a weapon for us against evil. Even in our most immature ways, we should embrace it, that it might be a part of our maturing spiritually. We find that the cross is for healing. In every instance of sickness, we should be making the sign of the cross over ourselves, over our children, over our beloved, over our elders. When the cross is found by Helen, the first thing it does is gives life and heals.

It is a blessing in our life and a source of healing for us. The very first thing the cross does, which is consistent with the theme that we've been talking about at our Lenten teachings this year ... The first thing that the cross does, before it is a blessing, because it hasn't been sanctified yet by Christ, before it becomes a source of healing, because it is an implement that Christ uses in our life to bring the healing that he has brought into the world, the first thing it is a weapon that defeats death and the devil. The very first thing the cross does is lifts up, in fulfillment of prophecy, Christ Himself, our Savior, that He might die that we might live.

It is through the cross that He descends into Hades and is victorious there, tearing down the gates, breaking the bonds, freeing the captives there. It is very important that we remember that the sign of the cross is a weapon against sin and against the devil. When you are tempted, make the sign of the cross. Experiment with it and see what happens. When you're having a thought that won't go away, start making the sign of the cross and see what happens. When you are afraid, make the sign of the cross.

The saints assure us that when we make the sign of the cross, it is like fire to the demons. As we learned this week from the fathers in the Philokalia, we are called to war against them. They are our enemies. Last night in vespers, we sang to the cross, and we called the cross the enemy of the devil and the demons. We didn't call the cross even only a weapon. We did not call the cross only a source of protection for us. We called the cross the enemy of the devil and the demons.

That makes clear how we are supposed to be identifying ourselves as the church militant. We are not here to survive what the devil and the demons do to us. We are here to be their enemy,

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by the power of Christ and His cross. We are the opposition to them, and we will be with Christ victorious in the end. Celebrate that cross this week. Make the sign of the cross often over yourself, over everything that comes into your life. Turn to it as a source of healing for you literally, physical and spiritual healing. Turn to it as something that sanctifies everything in your life and wield it as the weapon it is, as the enemy it is against the devil and the demons and the sin that attacks us, that we might be victorious in the end. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.