

Sunday of the Holy Cross

Heb 4:14 – 5:6; Mark 8:34 – 9:1

CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST !!!

We have gone almost half way in our lenten journey. Half way through Great Lent the Church puts the Holy Cross in the middle of the Church. We are reminded what lies ahead. And it has been a difficult first half. Many of us resist Great Lent. Yet because of our current plague, all of our world has joined us in our lenten journey, even if they are mostly unwilling.

In the passage of Hebrews immediately prior to the reading today we have: For the Word of God is living, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged-sword, piercing through even to the divisions of soul and spirit, of joint and marrow, and is a discerner of thoughts and heart; nor is there any creature that is not manifested in His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do.

Jesus – the Word of God, is both our Judge and our High-Priest. He suffered with us – He knows our infirmity. He took flesh, and shares our humanity. As Simeon the New Theologian observed: He “whose majesty is beyond anyone’s endurance has not disdained to become the father, the friend, the brother, of those rejected ones – the weak and the poor...”

Since He is both God and Man, He is our High Priest.

At the time of the writing of this epistle, the old priesthood had

passed away; it could only be spoken of in dimness, as a memory. Indeed, during the Roman occupation, the high-priests were often chosen for political reasons and not according to the law. Today, it is best that priests be chosen by God through the Church rather than desiring the office; for no one is worthy of it.

Yet Christ has become our High Priest. He Who Himself being God, equal to the Father, yet He humbled Himself to our flesh. And the Father has said: Thou art my Son, “This day” – This eternal day, the day we will celebrate in the coming feast of Pascha, – “have I begotten Thee.” This is how He begins His priestly act in time (and in three and a half weeks we will hear about it at the beginning of the service of the Passion Gospels on Holy Thursday) with “Father, the hour has come, glorify Me with the Glory I had with Thee before the world was made.” He Who has no eternal mother takes flesh from a human mother without a father and Comes to offer Himself for us.

And He suffers with us, and for us. He takes upon Himself the fragility of our human condition. It is especially important to remember that in these days.

Because of this, we go confidently before the throne of grace.

Jesus says, in the Gospel, “Take up your cross and follow Me.” We have a hard time hearing this. Our culture tells us we are supposed to be happy and to be happy we have to buy stuff. But the stuff never seems to make us happy. Our default cultural philosophy is Epicureanism: Pleasure is good; suffering is bad. Don’t delay gratification; buy now. We have a hard time hearing, “Take up your cross and follow me.” We have a hard time hearing

that, even though the suffering comes from unwelcome people, places, and things, that it can never-the-less be transformed to our healing and salvation. But now our world is hearing the importance of bearing one another's burdens; for if we do not we will perish both bodily and in soul.

Christ wants us to take up our cross and follow Him, for He went to the Cross. He emptied Himself and took on our flesh. He is not asking us to walk exceptionalities where He Himself has trod. Taking up our cross is to embrace our struggles and not be attached to our pleasures. Take up our cross – keep taking that next step, even when we are tired and hurting – keep taking that next step even when it makes no sense to us – even when we forget why we are stepping. St. Augustine observed that sometimes we carry our cross, and sometimes it carries us.

For Orthodox, we glory in the Resurrection; but we must remember the Cross and the Glory of the Resurrection together. The path to the Kingdom always goes through the Cross. The shame and despair of the Cross are never the final word, for through it we have the Kingdom of God and the Resurrection both of Christ, and the hope of resurrection for ourselves – but it comes through the Cross.

The Cross is our strength; the Cross is a wound to demons – but it is not magic. It becomes strong in our lives when we take it up and follow Jesus. And on our cross we must crucify not just our passions and desires, but also our will – that it may become as God wills in us. For behold, Jesus teaches us through the Cross how to be exalted in humility.

Before the Cross, at the supper, Jesus tells His disciples that He

will no more take the fruit of the vine until He tastes of it in His Kingdom. At the beginning of His Crucifixion He is offered sour wine. He refuses it. Then after three hours He says, "I thirst." Again He is offered the sour wine. This time He receives it; and then He declares: It has been finished; it is accomplished.

Through His Passion, Christ establishes the Glory of His Kingdom on earth; through His death and Resurrection the way of the Kingdom is now opened to us. We are restored through the Cross. Through the Cross, He has become our Peace and reconciliation.

This is what we are taught in the Kontakion of this day: Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of Eden; for it has been mysteriously quenched by the wood of the Cross. The sting of death and the victory of hell have been vanquished, for Thou, O Lord, hast come and cried to those in faith: enter again into Paradise."

Now He calls us to follow Him and take up our Cross that we might be united to His sufferings. Let us journey with Him to Jerusalem and share in His Passion in our own meager way that we may share in the Joy of His Resurrection, which gives us hope of our own.

Through Him may we find Paradise, and our Homeland in the Kingdom of God. To Whom be all glory and honour, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.