

Sermon Sunday of Orthodoxy

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:
CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST !!!

We have made it through the first week of Great Lent. This has been a hard week. But we made it. And the Church has given us these weekends as a time to fast, but not quite as rigorously. We have a couple of days each weekend, and then . . . the rigours of the week day return. Tonight we have WOCA vespers of Sunday evening to help us transition back into the rigours of the weekday. Two years ago we were at the beginning of the Pandemic; this was the last WOCA vespers that we did. This year we start again. The weekend is an important time to catch our breath and then once again face the journey to Pascha, preparing to face another week.

I would be remiss as your priest if I did not acknowledge the conflict in the world; a conflict that has brought Orthodox brother against Orthodox brethren. The history of the Church has always been messy. We can see this in St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians. St. Kyril of Alexandria had some problems with St. John Chrysostom. Indeed, the very thing we celebrate today started in AD 726 with an emperor who attempted to abolish icons. This action of the political leader had some support in earlier times by some of the Monophysite and Nestorian bishops. It was also fueled by fear of Islam and their proscription of images. For 117 years icons were removed from parishes and cathedrals. Illuminated manuscripts were destroyed. Some people (created in God's Image, were killed, and monks were forcibly

married to women; churches and monasteries were burned. Some bishops even got together to fashion a robber council to prohibit icons. This went back and forth for many years. At one point the emperor deposed the patriarch and forbade priests from preaching. Eventually the Orthodox way prevailed; and we call the victory of Orthodoxy over the iconoclasts: The Triumph of Orthodoxy.

Today we celebrate a great feast of the Incarnation of Christ. The Prophets proclaimed and prophesied the coming of our Lord in the flesh. And because of that it is both proper and necessary to depict that flesh in images. Hitherto no one had seen God in any form and it was not proper to depict Him.

Today we celebrate the return of icons to the worship of Christ our God on earth. Today we commemorate the restoration in AD 843 of Icons. They went in procession to the Church of Theotokos ton Blakhernós, and restored the icons.

The scriptures we read were catechistic. They are pointing those who will be baptised at the end of Great Lent to what the beginning of the journey was for the disciples, and reminding them of the prophets of old that looked forward to the Kingdom and the coming of the Messiah but never saw it themselves. We celebrate the Incarnation of the Word of God Who took flesh for our sake. The indescribable deigned to become describable. As we will hear in the Gospel on Bright Monday: “No man has ever seen God; the only begotten Son Who Is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

He Who is the very radiance of the glory of God, the very Icon of His Person has shown Himself. As we sing in Matins: “God is the Lord and has revealed Himself unto us!” For He Who is the very Icon of God has taken that flesh that He Himself created in His Image, and joined the two together without confusion.

We venerate icons by kissing them as we would kiss a revered friend. We venerate them by bowing, again as to a revered friend. We also venerate them by censuring them with incense. When we cense icons we are recognizing that the person depicted was created in God’s Image and reflected His likeness.

But we also cense us – we humans. We are created in God’s Image; by censuring ourselves we honour that Image of God in ourselves.

So as we honour the Image of God in ourselves by censuring we must ask ourselves: “Do we honour God’s Image in us?” Is how we live a reflection of that Image of God in us? Do we seek God’s will in our lives? Do we honour His image in ourselves? our family members? Our co-workers? The people we meet everyday? Do we see God’s image in the Barista who makes our coffee drink? Do we see the Image of God in the homeless person whose path we cross? Do we see the Image of God in the person whose politics we despise? In the eyes of the refugee who asks for a safe place? Do we see God’s Image in the face of those people we don’t like?

For all of us, that likeness with God is broken and distorted. Are we working with God to restore that likeness? How are we treating His Image in others . . . remembering that He said that

how we treat the least of these is how we treat Him? By how we treat ourselves and others we often are guilty of being iconoclasts.

These are questions that this Sunday requires us to look at. While we are celebrating the Triumph this evening we must pause and take stock at where we are. Celebrating the restoration of Icons means we must work on restoring God's Likeness in us.

The older themes of this Sunday can help us. Before the restoration of Icons, this Sunday was dedicated to the prophets. If you read or sing the hymns of this Sunday you will notice that it bounces between Icons and the Prophets. If we were to do Complines tonight we would hear the older canon of the Prophets. The prophets called Israel and Judah to repentance. They called the people to treat the poor, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner with respect. They called the people to treat their children as precious gifts from God, and not as a thing that can be disposed of to appease a Ba-al, or to appease our gods of material gain and convenience. They called the people back from, and criticized the false images of their material greed, their love of power over love of people. And the people did not repent and had to pay the cost in exile. We are encouraged during Lent to read the prophet Isaiah. No matter what age we live in, the book of Isaiah has some sobering criticism of our society.

He sandwiches his prophecies of destruction with consolation, with the message: "It doesn't have to be that way; you can repent."; in some way he is saying to us today: "It doesn't have to be this way; we can repent." By Chapter 40 it becomes clear that the people won't repent, and he prepares them for exile and return. Great Lent is a period of exile and return from exile.

This is what the Church asks us to chew on as we journey towards Pascha. God calls us in this period to work with Him to restore His likeness in us. The prayers are all a part of that. The Presanctified Liturgy and other services are all a part of that. Fasting is all a part of that. Alms are all a part of that. The Triodion is part of that. The prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian is part of that. These are the tools we have been given. These tools must be applied with love, or they will be useless to us. These tools help us see clearly. Very often we have a distorted view of ourselves, either overlooking or excusing *our own sin with pride, or aggrandizing our sin (making it bigger and unsurmountable in our eyes) . . . and falling into despair. But we can repent. . . it doesn't have to be this way.

All of this takes place, today on a canvass of war — of war in which one Orthodox country has invaded another Orthodox country. A grave sin is being set forth. War is always a grave sin. And we hear this war both decried and justified. And some of the noise of war is being spoken by Orthodox bishops and clerics — a noise that we sometimes hear from our own mouths.

Brothers and sisters, the war is out there. It is real; it is serious. It, like the iconoclast controversy of 1400 years ago threatens the unity of the Church. In addition to actual icons and churches being bombed, people created in God's Image are dying. This is a wound that, if we take the Incarnation seriously, runs very deep. And, at the same time that we must grieve that wound, please, do not let the war come into our heads. Let us not fight with our brothers and sisters and so perpetuate the grievous sin that comes with war. But most importantly, do not let the war into our own

heads; do not fight it out in ourselves. As I said last week, this will be one of the hardest of Great Lents for us. The needs of our brothers and sisters in the war-torn country of Ukraine are real; and, if you wish to help, our diocese will make sure assistance gets to Metropolitan Onuphry. Be careful; choose the news outlets that you use carefully; some of them gain following and revenue by stoking the flames of fear and anger; . . . and they are working over-time. Or better yet fast from too much news – for this distracts us from our work of coming to God in repentance. We are being given the temptation of replacing God with our own fear and need to feel in control. We are being invited to a new iconoclasm within ourselves. For when we are in control, we push God out of our lives.

God calls us today to restore His Likeness in us, just as the icons were restored to the Churches. ... to Him be glory and honour, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.