

Homily on the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross
Fr. Anthony Perkins, St. Michael Ukrainian Orthodox Church
Hebrews 4:14-5:6 & Mark 8:34-9:1

Do you see the irony?

This is the feast celebrating the Precious Cross. We wear crosses. We put them in our houses. We adorn our temples with them (inside and out; on our doors and the very top of our cupolas). We trace its image over our bodies throughout the day. Have you ever realized how that looks?

An instrument of torture and humiliation, perfected by pagans, has become the sign of our faith. A degrading and wicked instrument of death is, according to the Hymns of Church, the “unconquerable trophy of the true faith, door to paradise, succor of the faithful, and rampart set about the Church” (Vespers stichera).

This is something that should wake us from our slumber. This is something so jolting - but so fundamentally true - that it should force us to see things not through the eyes of the fallen world, but through the eyes of “true seeing”. Christ brought sight to the blind during his earthly ministry. Through contemplation of the Cross, He will bring spiritual sight, true sight, to all of us (and in seeing, we will follow Him through the Cross, to Paradise).

The Cross is anathema to the world – it does not understand the Passion. It does not understand sacrifice. It only understands and seeks the comfort and pleasure of today and the foreseeable (and finite) future. The world sees through the fallen eyes of Adam. Adam hoped to find pleasure in the beautiful fruit of the Tree, but found only bitterness (a beautiful tree brought Him only bitterness). The true-seeing man seeks true pleasure today and forever, and finds it in the Cross (a horrific Cross brings him everlasting joy). The promises of worldly pleasure are empty, but the promise of the Cross is already being fulfilled.

Yes, there is great irony in the Cross, but it is only because the Truth is so out of synch with the millennia of lies that we have told in our fallenness. It is the one piece of Order and Truth in a world of chaos.

- In the chaos of infantry battles, the king would plant his banner so that his scattered troops would rally around him. It was a single point of stability in the chaos of battle. Rallying to it and around it was the only hope of survival for the individual soldier and for the force at large. The Cross is planted in this world so that we might rally to it. We are not meant to struggle alone, but together (working together, not individual bravery or skill, is the key to military success). And not just around any cause, but around the True King’s banner: the Cross.
- The taste of Fruit of the Tree was sweet, brought illness; the taste of the Cross is bitter, but brings healing to all. While this is jarring, it accords with our experience. Medicine is bitter (or it used to be); shots hurt. Treatment can be long and excruciating. More so because it does not always work. But know this: the medical treatment of the Cross can be difficult, but it’s success is sure. The Cross brings healing to all. Through the Cross, Christ took on the sins of the world – through His Cross, we are healed of all our diseases and infirmities and made worthy to grow in unity with Him and one another. He is the Great Physician, and the love of the Cross is the medicine of salvation.

“Come, Adam and Eve, our first father and mother, who fell from the choir on high... when of old with bitter pleasure ye tasted from the tree in Paradise. See, the Tree of the Cross, revered by all, draws near! Run with haste and embrace it joyfully, and cry to it with faith: O precious Cross, though art our succor; partaking of thy fruit, we have gained incorruption; we are restored once more to Eden, and we have received great mercy.” (Vespers stichera).

Do not be ashamed of Our Lord. Do not be ashamed of His Cross. Deny yourself. Pick up your cross and follow Him. Follow Him to eternal health and everlasting joy. This is the way of Christ. This is the way to victory.

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Hebrews 4:14-5:6

Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

Mark 8:34-9:1

And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.

Veneration of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross (Tropar, Tone 1)

O Lord, save your people, and bless your inheritance. Grant victories to the Orthodox Christians over their adversaries; and by virtue of Your Cross, preserve your habitation.

Veneration of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross (Tropar, Tone 1)

Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of Eden; it has been mysteriously quenched by the wood of the Cross! The sting of death and the victory of hell have been vanquished; for You, O my Savior, have come and cried to those in hell: "Enter again into paradise."