

**THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT  
(ADORATION OF THE CROSS)  
FEBRUARY 26/MARCH 11, 2007**

**HEBREWS 4:14-5.6**

**ST. MARK 8:34-9.1**

by

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**Gospel:** *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 the 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.*

...

The Lord does not try to coerce with His words those who do not wish to follow Him, inasmuch as he who coerces often repels those whom he would compel, whereas he who leaves listeners with a choice more readily attracts them; therefore, He said, Whosoever is willing.

[Hieromonk German Ciuba, (tr. from the Slavonic into English; tr. from the original Greek into Slavonic in the year 6851, A.D. 1343), *The Gospel Commentary*, Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, PA, 2002, pp. 92-93.]

## Taking Up His Cross

Peter rebuked the Lord for ‘willing’ His Passion. He, as well as the other disciples, probably could not understand why He chose It when it was within His power to avoid all suffering. The disciples didn’t fully comprehend. Christ called Peter “Satan” for his rebuke, not because he was Satan, but he had the evil one’s thoughts. Satan, the adversary, alone didn’t want Christ to go to His Passion and thereby save mankind.<sup>1</sup> The Lord commands Peter to “Get thee behind Me,” i.e., “follow My will and do not oppose it”.<sup>2</sup>

Peter (and by implication, the others) were to follow His lead. This required that Peter and they think in spiritual, not earthly, terms.<sup>3</sup> Christ’s road is one of suffering and struggle leading to that which is *not of this world*. There was, and is, no other way. The Lord *voluntarily* suffered humiliation, scourging and crucifixion for the salvation of the world:

What does it mean to take up your cross? It means the *willing* (emphasis supplied) acceptance at the hand of Providence, of every means of healing, bitter though it may be, that is offered. Do great catastrophes fall on you? Give yourself into God’s hands with the same faith as Abram had when he went to sacrifice his son. Is your property ruined? Do your children die suddenly? Suffer it all with patience, cleaving to God in your heart as Job did. Do your friends forsake you, and you find yourself surrounded by enemies? Bear it all without grumbling, and with faith that God’s help is at hand as the Apostles did.<sup>4</sup>

In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls the people and disciples unto Him, in the main, to direct His remarks to the impetuous Peter. He makes it clear to Peter that taking up the Cross is *critical*:

Do you find fault with Me, Peter, because I take up the Cross? I say to you, that neither you, nor anyone else, will be saved unless you die for the sake of goodness and truth.<sup>5</sup>

## No Compulsion

Taking up the Cross *is* critical but still voluntary. It is an exercise of our free will:

Whosoever *desireth* (emphasis supplied) to follow after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

He is not forcing anyone to take up the Cross; rather, Christ invites us to take up our spiritual struggle, enthusiastically accepting His Way. But those unwilling are not worthy of that which they implicitly reject:

I compel no one. I invite him to something good, not to something bad to which I must compel him. Whoever does *not* want these things is *not worthy* of them (emphases supplied).<sup>6</sup>

...

Christ did *not* say, I bid you do this and suffer, whether ye would or not, nor (did He say) I compel you to follow me; rather (He said) Whosoever *wishes* and comes of *his own free will*, let him follow Me. I do not compel, He says, I do not coerce; I leave every man the master of his will. I call men to come to that which is good, to the heavenly kingdom without end, to perpetual rest (emphases supplied).<sup>7</sup>

If ‘Push Comes to Shove’

Yet, those who accept the Cross must be willing to suffer all kinds of grievous harm, including the supreme sacrifice of *this* world, death. Following Christ means ‘all the way’:

For whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the Gospel’s the same shall save it.

Whosoever loses his life for Christ “shall find it”.<sup>8</sup> This is not a cruel command but one given out of His abiding love for us.<sup>9</sup> Christ’s Cross is ours too, if we freely accept all this implies. He has clearly set out His expectations from such ‘Christian Volunteers’ – martyrdom, no less, if it comes to it. Will we be up to the task? Pray the Lord strengthen us for whatever struggles and suffering occur along the Way.

Is the Soul Up for Sale?

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

...

Even if one were king of the whole inhabited earth, and possessed all the property in the world, he could not buy back his soul, not for all the goods in the world.<sup>10</sup>

If we have become extremely successful, own houses, cars, trucks, boats, computer systems, bank accounts, stocks, mutual funds, top of the line designer clothes, and vacation homes in high-dollar resorts, but we show no mercy, compassion or pity for our fellow human beings, we have not found “life”:

All the (fine) foods and fair garments of this world cannot give the soul the slightest rest or comfort when it is being tormented for all eternity.<sup>11</sup>

...

To save one’s life in the wrong way is worse than to lose it.<sup>12</sup>

If we are the self-centred aggressive individuals (unfortunately, men or women nowadays) who zigzag through morning and evening rush-hour traffic cutting off other drivers, honking our horns and flashing our lights for them to ‘get over,’ we have not found “life”:

### Some Examples of ‘Good Works’ We Could Well Emulate in Our Lives

It is very interesting that quite commonly the most affluent people in society are generous and ‘make a difference’ with their lives in giving back to the community some of their fortunate gains from this life (Bill Gates and Paul Newman for example). Indeed, many wealthy people, including well-known sports stars, donate large sums *anonymously* to causes that benefit the less fortunate among us. This shows humility and is looked upon with favour by the Lord. The young singing sensation of “American Idol” fame, Clay Aiken of North Carolina, has set up a foundation for autistic children with his first ‘winnings’ from his success. Clay Aiken is not the ordinary pop image we are accustomed to, and rightly turned off by in America. His principles and caring nature come from his devout spirit even though he is not of the true Faith. Still, his example is one many Orthodox could well follow.

We don’t have the money these people do obviously, but that isn’t the point. It is that we should turn our lives around and look out for our neighbours, if not with money, with time, effort, compassion, mercy and understanding.

Man has nothing to give in exchange for his soul; God, however, gave the precious Blood of His Only-Begotten Son in exchange for our salvation.<sup>13</sup>

### Sanctification

If we wish to accept the terms of Christ’s Offer of Salvation, we willingly, voluntarily take up the Cross. In doing so, we should remember that our sanctification is two-fold. The soul is sanctified by faith “but the body is sanctified by confessing”. We must not be ashamed to confess the Son of Man as our Saviour. If we are ashamed to confess Christ as our Lord, then He will also be ashamed of us.<sup>14</sup>

### The Transfiguration

As today’s Gospel closes, Christ states that some before Him, standing there, will not die until they have seen the glory of God’s kingdom. He refers to Peter, James and John, who were present at the Transfiguration of Christ, which foreshadows His Second Coming:

... as He appeared shining then, so will He shine at the Second Coming, as will also all the righteous.<sup>15</sup>

In six days, He took them onto a high mountain where He was transfigured before their eyes, meaning that neither His form nor features changed, but there was “the addition of ineffable light to His unchanged form”.<sup>16</sup>

Taking up Christ's Cross is not an easy task. But it isn't meant to be! Being a true Christian requires struggle and sacrifice once we have made the decision to willingly and voluntarily take up the Cross. Being True Orthodox Christians means accepting the Lord as our Saviour and following Him, imitating His Divine Goodness, striving to 'recast' ourselves in His image, at the same time realising that our spiritual failings will 'interrupt' our spiritual progress from time to time thus requiring our repentance and actions to back it up. [I.e., we don't repent and then go right on doing what is wrong.]

Christ sets trials for us along the Royal Path to test our mettle. To see how we will respond. Will we take it all in stride or try to do the modern thing, shift the blame to someone else? Those "Christian Volunteers" who enter the spiritual fray, suffer the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", and persevere through repentance and good works will find the 'spiritual good life' in Christ's mercy. Simply put, we are free to choose. Which way shall it be, His Way or the highway?

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

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<sup>1</sup> Bl. Theophylact's *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark, Vol. II* in the series, Bl. Theophylact's *Explanation of the New Testament* (tr. from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade), Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> *id.*

<sup>3</sup> *id.*

<sup>4</sup> [Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, *Homilies, Vol. 1*, in *Gleanings from Orthodox Christian Authors & the Holy Fathers – Cross* at <http://www.orthodox.net/gleanings/cross.html>.]

<sup>5</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> *id.*

<sup>7</sup> Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> *id.*

<sup>10</sup> Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> *id.*

<sup>12</sup> *id.*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> *id.*, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> *id.* and see Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, St. Mark 9:2-3, p. 72.