

We Must Enter into Christ's Death In Order to Rise with Him: A Homily Near the End of Great Lent in the Orthodox Church



We go to great lengths to insulate ourselves from the realities of suffering and death. Consequently, people who experience profound loss and sorrow often find themselves alone. Surely, it is difficult to be in the presence of those in great pain of any kind, especially those who are dying, for we often feel helpless before them and are reminded of our own mortality. At some level, we know that something similar is in store for us.

Perhaps these tendencies have at least something to do with why so few of our Lord's followers stood at the foot of His cross as He suffered and died. The Theotokos, the other women, and St. John refused to abandon Him, but the rest of the disciples fled in fear. Surely, they had good reason to be afraid for it had to be dangerous to be associated publically with someone who was crucified as a traitor to the Romans after being rejected as a blasphemer by the leaders of the Jews. But the Theotokos, the other righteous women, and St. John did not flee. They refused to allow their shock and sorrow to cause them

to abandon their Saviour, even in the midst of His horrible suffering and death.

The season of Great Lent gives each of us blessed opportunities to become like those who remained at the foot of the Cross, who endured the agony of beholding our Lord's self-offering for the life of the world. We will soon enter quite profoundly into the mystery of our salvation in as we journey with Christ from the raising of Lazarus to His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where in a matter of days He is rejected and condemned by those He came to save. We will chant "Today is hung upon the tree He who hung the earth upon the waters." We will not merely remember His crucifixion as a past historical event during the services of Great and Holy Friday; no, as we read the Passion Gospels and place Christ on the Cross, we enter into the eternal present of the divine love that stops at nothing, not even death, the tomb, and Hades, in order to bring us—and the entire creation—into the eternal blessedness for which He breathed life into us in the first place and for which He spoke the universe into existence.

So we are not only figuratively in the place of those who stood at the foot of the Cross. We really are there, even as we are really guests at the heavenly banquet in every Divine Liturgy. Is it surprising, then, that we need several weeks of preparation in order to have the spiritual strength and clarity necessary to abide with the God-Man as He suffers and dies for us? "The King of Angels...Who wrapped the heavens with clouds" humbles Himself to the point of accepting hatred, torture, and cruel public execution purely out of love for all of us who have rejected Him time and again. He even asks the Father to forgive His tormenters for "they know not what they do." This is not the death of a mere teacher or example, but the slaughter of the true Passover Lamb, the Incarnate Son of God Who is fully divine and fully human. If we shy away from the suffering and death of those we encounter daily, how much more will we shake with holy fear before the death of the Alpha and Omega of the universe? How much more will we say "This is no place for me!" and run away from the Cross?

Perhaps we feel justified in doing so because we have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story. Our Lord will rise victorious on the third day. Who does not want to shout "Christ is Risen!" as soon as possible? The problem, of course, is that we cannot enter into the great mystery of His resurrection unless we first participate in His death. Even as our Saviour tramples down death by death, we too must die to death, to the corruption and decay that our following in the way of Adam and Eve has brought about in our own lives. That means death to sin however it has taken root in us, however it has distorted and disfigured us as living icons of our Lord. A once beautiful painting loses nothing but its ugliness from an expert restoration that reveals its original beauty. The same is true for us when we turn away from all that separates us from growing evermore like God as partakers of the divine nature. That is the fulfilment of the ancient, true, and beautiful vocation to which Lent calls us.

The Christian life begins with baptism into the Lord's death as we die to sin and rise with Him into newness of life. We put on Christ in baptism and regain the robe of light that Adam lost. That is, of course, only the beginning of the journey to become radiant with the divine energies like an iron left in the fire. Unfortunately, we so easily return to the ways of the first Adam, preferring the darkness of our own corruption to the brilliant light of God's glory.

As Christ taught, we must persevere in dying to death by taking up our crosses and losing our lives in order to save them. We must struggle each day to die to the corrupting effects of sin and embrace more fully the holy joy which our Lord's cross has brought to the world. As St. Paul writes, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Gal. 5:24) Slavery to self-centred desires is never a path to joy,

but only to addiction to self-imposed misery which will never satisfy us. God did not create us for the tomb of slavery to ourselves, but for the eternal joy appropriate to those who join themselves to His self-offering in free obedience as beloved sons and daughters of the Most High.

And that is what Great Lent is for. By devoting ourselves to prayer, by fasting from rich food and anything else to which we have an unhealthy attachment, by sharing our resources and attention with the needy, by forgiving our enemies and healing broken relationships, by humbly confessing our sins and reorienting our lives toward Christ, by embracing the practices of this season, we crucify our passions and desires. We advance in putting to death the morbid distortions of sin in our lives. We open ourselves at least a bit more fully to the victory over sin and death that Jesus Christ has accomplished through His Cross. We take up our crosses and follow Him one step at a time. We participate in His trampling down death by death when we use the spiritual disciplines of Lent to trample down the pernicious power of the passions in our lives. The more we unite ourselves to our Lord's Cross in these ways, the more we will know the Cross as victory, not as a defeat--as the path to joy, not to despair.

The disciples surely fled the crucifixion in large part because they had no hope. They thought that it was all over for Jesus Christ and for them as His followers. Perhaps we are tempted to abandon our friends and loved ones in their final years or hours, or in other times of great pain, because we see no future for them or ultimately for ourselves. That may be the way it is with the first Adam, but it is surely not with the Second Adam Who brings life from the very depths of Hades, light from the darkness of the tomb, and unspeakable joy from the worst despair.

Here is the key point: If we do not enter into the reality of our Saviour's crucifixion, we will find it impossible to celebrate Pascha as much more than a cultural festival with rich food. If we do not make progress in crucifying our passions this Lent, we will lack the spiritual clarity to see our Lord's Cross as much more than an unwelcome reminder of our own pain and suffering in the world as we know it. In effect, we will abandon Him in fear like the disciples who fled and miss the entire meaning of this penitential season, as well as of Pascha.

But those who take up their crosses and die to the ways of death in their lives will do something very different. They will abide at the foot of the Cross and participate in the deep mystery of salvation in ways too profound for words. They will not then run away in fear, but with the Most Holy Theotokos and all the Saints, will enter personally into the joy before which even Hades and the tomb are powerless. That is the great promise of this blessed season of Great Lent. If we will join ourselves to our Lord's self-offering on His Precious and Life-Giving Cross, if we will truly enter into His death, then we too will know the indescribable joy that comes on the third day.

Fr. Philip LeMasters

"Why the Wise Thief Was Pardoned"

The faith of the thief, born of his esteem for Christ's moral greatness, proved stronger than the faith of the Apostles . . .

The Apostles wavered in their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, because they anticipated and desired to see in Him an earthly king, in whose kingdom they could sit at the right and the left hand of the Lord.

The thief understood that the Kingdom of Jesus of Nazareth, despised and given over to a shameful death, was not of this world. And it was precisely this Kingdom that the thief now sought: the gates of earthly life were closing after him; opening before him was eternity. He had settled his accounts with life on earth, and now he thought of life eternal. And here, at the threshold of eternity, he began to understand the vanity of earthly glory and earthly kingdoms. He recognized that greatness consists in righteousness, and in the righteous, blamelessly tortured Jesus he saw the King of Righteousness. The thief did not ask Him for glory in an earthly kingdom but for the salvation of his soul.

The faith of the thief, born of his esteem for Christ's moral greatness, proved stronger than the faith of the Apostles, who although captivated by the loftiness of Christ's teaching, based their faith to a still greater extent on the signs and wonders He wrought.

Now there was no miraculous deliverance of Christ from His enemies — and the Apostles' faith was shaken.

But the patience He exhibited, His absolute forgiveness, and the faith that His Heavenly Father heard Him so clearly, indicated Jesus' righteousness, His moral superiority, that one seeking spiritual and moral rebirth could not be shaken.

And this is precisely what the thief, aware of the depth of his fall, craved. He did not ask to sit at the right or the left hand of Christ in His Kingdom, but, conscious of his unworthiness, he asked in humility simply that he be remembered in His Kingdom, that he be given even the lowest place.

+ St. John Maximovitch of Shanghai and San Francisco, From *Man of God: Saint John of Shanghai & San Francisco*