

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 14: 22-34

August 25, 2013

I'm sure that many of us are still enjoying the spiritual uplift of our wonderful Transfiguration weekend last week. What a blessing to Met. Joseph with us for the Feast. He is, truly, one of those rather rare people who can produce in others the feeling of "philotimo", of "responsive gratefulness". I, personally, cannot spend much time with him without trying to be a better person. He, truly, has an infectious faith and love for Jesus Christ, for the Theotokos, for Holy Orthodoxy and for each of us personally.

When we experience the Love of God for us through godly people, like Dedo Valdika, we can, perhaps, gain an insight into what might have motivated St. Peter in today's Gospel. He was, after all, a disciple of Christ not because of any pragmatic or intellectual reasons but rather because Jesus had touched his heart with His Personal Divine Love. This experience of Divine Love is always the foundation of any genuine Christian discipleship and creates in the receivers of this blessing a wonderful sense of new and previously unimaginable possibilities. Certainly the most astonishing of all these possibilities is the fact that I, unloving and, if truth be known, the unloveable one, am experiencing Love. Not the kind of love that can be experienced by "partners in crime", not the "honor among thieves" that is the best we are capable of in-and-of ourselves, but rather the love of a person who has, dare I say it, some righteousness before God. Such people have sufficient personal humility that God's Love can be, to some extent, revealed through them.

St. Peter's experience was, probably, much more intense than anything we will ever know. After all, this is Christ Himself, unmediated by any other personal presence. Yet Peter is a model for any genuine devotee or disciple. He loves his Master more than he understands Him. Loving Him, he, also, believes in Him. He has already seen for himself that Jesus wields Divine Power.

In that sense, Peter's response to seeing Jesus walking on the water is not so very difficult to understand. Of course, in his zeal of devotion he has gotten quite a bit ahead of himself and will learn a frightening and humiliating lesson because of it. But that is not at all unusual in the spiritual life. We undertake a life of discipleship out of responsive gratefulness. But we will still have many hard lessons to learn.

One of the things Met. Joseph stressed in his talks with us was the importance of cultivating good thoughts and rejecting bad thoughts. Thoughts are, in a way, like icons with which we can either adorn or defile the temple of our inner world. St. Paul asks us in today's Epistle, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the spirit of God dwells in you?" Think about it!

Elder Paisios, also, urged his spiritual children to be careful about their thinking. "We must always be careful and constantly question the nature of our thoughts". He would say, "We must have positive thoughts". He, also, taught "otherwise none of the spiritual Fathers can help us", serious Christians, humbly recognizing the difficulty of such an undertaking, have always sought the counsel of a spiritual advisor or what we in the Orthodox tradition call a spiritual father or mother.

In his talks, Met. Joseph used the term imagination several times, urging us to imagine good things rather than bad things. When I heard this I thought, "Uh, oh, I'm going to hear about this from someone" and, sure enough, I did. We often read in the spiritual Fathers that we are not to imagine anything when we are praying; that at a certain point in our effort to commune with God, all images, good and bad, must be transcended. Having never reached such a state myself, I can only assume this to be true. An aspect of this teaching that I do understand is the warning about using the imaginative power of the soul (which St. Peter makes visible to us in today's Gospel) to create false images that, nonetheless, appear real to us. This is phantasy and delusion which when experienced by a person who proudly trusts in his own thought, is a recipe for spiritual ruin. Again, this is why we have spiritual Fathers. The imaginative power of the soul is described by St. Gregory Palamas as an "intermediary between the intellect and the senses...from these thoughts are born most virtues and vices as well as opinions, whether right or wrong."

We see, then, that the imagination is a natural function of the intelligence that God has created for us to exercise. Like all our faculties, it can be used foolishly or wisely.

Returning to the cultivation of positive and good thoughts, one of the simplest and first steps in this direction is the absolute necessity of quiet time. We cannot guard our thoughts if we cannot hear ourselves think. Our modern world is full of noise. I would urge everyone to use the Fasts as a time to fast from noise and distractions. Turn off the radio, the TV, the iPod, Facebook. You may be surprised to discover how difficult this can be. But if you were inspired by Dedo Vladika's visit and heard his archpastoral counsel with a positive attitude, here is a practical way to make a beginning. May it be blessed.