

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost June 22, 2014

Brothers and Sisters in Christ – May our Lord Jesus Christ bless us all this morning, with His mercy and great goodness. And, may we respond to that blessing with heartfelt gratitude and sincere worship. We are such fortunate people.

During the weeks following Pentecost and the gifting of the Holy Spirit, the Church focuses its attention upon the fruit of that gifting – the lives of holy men, women and children. The object of our contemplation thus turns somewhat, from what Christ did in the great work of His incarnation, towards what the effect of that work looks like in the lives of regular human beings such as ourselves. For example, the Apostles Fast, which marks the beginning of this time, is dedicated to two great examples of this fruitfulness, the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Another way of saying this might be that, now that we have reflected deeply upon Christ's Passion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost, the Church is turning our attention to the subject of Discipleship. Last week's Matins Gospel was Matt 25:16- the great Commission. This is where Christ, after His Resurrection, tells His disciples to go forth and make "disciples of all nations". In other words, to proclaim and witness to the wonderful "good news", the Gospel, in such a way that people of all times and cultures would have the opportunity and the desire to become His disciples just as they had done. Today's Gospel reading also points to discipleship, reminding us of Christ's calling of these same first disciples. So, during this Apostle's Fast I would like to invite you all to join me, and our greater Church family, in an active contemplation of discipleship generally and of Christian Discipleship in particular.

The dictionary defines the word 'disciple' as 'one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another, and as, 'a convinced adherent of a school or individual' or simply, 'a follower' of such a school or person. In its Christian context the term has the double meaning of being a follower of both the person and the doctrines of Jesus Christ. The Christian Doctrines, their teaching and message of 'good news' for humanity, have their source in the person of Jesus Christ and, according to that teaching can never be separated or "abstracted" from a personal relationship with Christ Himself. "I am the way, the truth and the life", says Christ, not I teach a way, a truth or a life. Jesus calls people, not to a system, so much as to himself.

But what can we say about ourselves today as disciples? It has been quite accurately observed that one of the greatest problems for the Church in modern times is that too many of us are members of the Church without ever becoming disciples of Christ. This is the problem of what is called church nominalism, of being a Christian in name only. Our challenge, indeed a mission within the Church itself, is to transform membership into discipleship.

I must emphasize here that this is a problem that all of us, not just some of us, face. Some more, some less, but this is really just a symptom of the tendency we all share of retreating from the awesome freedom and danger of a personal loving communion with Jesus Christ. For Orthodox this is most commonly experienced as a tendency to retreat into the security of formalism. Yes, "our God is a consuming fire", and if we are not careful He will consume all of our egoism, vanity, self-obsession and sin. It is a possibility both attractive and at the same time frightening. Also, we must admit that maintaining a genuine, living, transformative relationship with a Being who has been living in a different world than our own for over 2000 years presents certain difficulties. I once flirted with the idea of a lecture on prayer titled, "Talking to people who never talk back". It must also be admitted that the demands of traditional Orthodox piety and practice, coupled with some Orthodox teaching about the difficulty of salvation, can be overwhelming. It is all too easy to acquire the opinion that unless we are religious zealots we are doomed anyway.

Most of us are not religious zealots, thank God. I have encountered quite a few such people, of diverse followings, and I must say that I do not usually enjoy their company. Zealotry is not what discipleship is about. Discipleship is about love. So, the trick here is to discover how we can grow our love for Christ and thus become not religious fanatics but disciples – people who love Jesus Christ enough to follow Him.

Here is some good advice on this matter from a holy person of our own time, the newly canonized Elder Porphyrios, "You don't become holy by fighting evil. Let evil be. Look towards Christ and that will save you. What makes a person saintly is love. Accordingly, in your spiritual life engage in your daily contests simply, easily and without force." Then he tells us what these "daily contests should consist of, "the soul is sanctified by the study of the words of the Fathers, through the memorization of the Psalms and portions of Scripture, through the singing of hymns and through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer." "Devote your efforts," he says, "to these spiritual things and ignore all the other things". In another place he teaches, "do these spiritual things and ignore the other things", and he also teaches, "do not fight to expel the darkness from the

chamber of your soul. Open a tiny aperture for light to enter, and the darkness will disappear. Do not choose negative methods to correct yourself. There is no need to fear the devil or hell or anything else. These provoke a negative reaction...The object is not to sit and afflict and constrain yourself in order to improve. The object is to live, to study, to pray and advance in love – in love for Christ and for the Church."

"There are two paths that lead to God," says St Porphyrios, "the hard and debilitating path with fierce assaults against evil, and the easy path with love..I find that the shorter and safer route is the path with love. This is the path that you, too, should follow."

Wonderful words from our Church's most recently canonized saint. In order to grow in discipleship our minds and our hearts must be nourished with good things, beautiful things that kindle desire and longing for heaven in our hearts. Love for Christ and for His kingdom is easily squashed by the vanities and worries and cares of this world, unless we focus our energies on those things that nourish our faith and our love for God. We must pray every day to open that little window into our hearts whereby the light can enter in – that is our daily contest – reading Scripture, study of the writings of the Fathers, keeping the fasts, singing hymns and repetition of the Jesus Prayer and charitable works – these are really very simple and easy things to do. By doing these things faithfully, to again quote St. Porphyrios, "you will gradually acquire meekness, humility and love and your soul will be made good". Indeed, here then is the way to transform Church membership into Orthodox Discipleship, a living and loving communion with Jesus Christ and with our fellow Christians. We will hear more about this next week.