

## Sunday of All Saints 2013

Today's Gospel reading, and indeed all of the Scripture readings this past week, put me in mind of Professor Lewis' famous 'Trilema'. You may recall that he, in attempting to bash the popular notion of Jesus being merely a great moral teacher, declared that anyone who actually read what Jesus was reported to have said was faced with only three possible conclusions. Either He was a liar – in the sense of a charlatan or con-man; or he was insane – believing himself to be someone He was not, like a person who believes he's Napoleon; or He is who He says He is – God Incarnate.

I am reminded of this because lately the readings have been loaded with really, really, really hard sayings. Last week, for example, we heard the Beatitudes. Now many people claim these to be inspiring but nobody seems to be very skilled or consistent in their practice. If you take such as "poor in spirit", "pure in heart", or "meekness" seriously and apply them to yourself, I'm sure that you will see what I mean. Then today we are told that we must confess Christ, must love Christ more than we love our families and that following Christ will bring us into conflict with our friends and families and society and will result in painful sufferings for us. It is true that rewards are offered; blessedness and honor before God and everlasting life. However, it is rather easy to see how some cynical people might get the idea of "pie in the sky" from all this.

But then we have the Saints. Today is All Saints Day. The Church holds up its Cloud of Witnesses to show that it's not "pie in the sky", that Jesus is neither a deceiver, nor is He a nut. Rather they confirm and confess Christ to be exactly who He said He was – God Incarnate, the absolute truth of all things – in Person. For our Saints do not declare their own glory or holiness. They do not say to us "look at me", even though people inevitably do so. Many Saints, such as St. John Maximovitch who we will honor with a special service tomorrow evening, lived such astonishing lives that people are tempted to worship them.

Abbot Herman used to insist that American Converts, (and all Orthodox people, really), read lives of saints and especially he taught that we should read lives of saints who were close to us in time. Only by doing this, he said, would we be able to really understand the more ancient church saints, our spiritual ancestors as it were. Take for example St. John again. He was not only a monk, a true ascetic and a Bishop but was also what is called an Ethnarch – the leader of a community of White Russians, refugees from Communism and those displaced by World War II. He was not just the church leader but also the civic leader of these people who, by his labors were safely settled into the US mostly in the San Francisco area. We also had a local example of this kind of thing here in Syracuse a few years back in the person of Fr. Hanna Sakkab, who was

not only a priest at St. Elias but also a leader of the greater Arabic Community, even among Moslems and secularized Arabs. Our own Metropolitan Joseph is something of the same for the Bulgarians – even the ones who don't go to church. I got my own first glimpse of this during my trip to Mt. Athos. One of the monks asked him how many people were in his Diocese. He answered 250,000. I was shocked because in terms of church goers our Diocese is a tiny fraction of that number. It took me awhile to understand that he regards all Bulgarians in the USA, Canada and Australia as his responsibility. Bishop Daniil also has the same spirit. We must pray that God will rise up for us holy heroes and leaders who have this same feeling and spirit for America and Americans. God grant it.

I think that it is very important that we also consider the fact that 'All Saints Day' was instituted so as to include all of the unknown and unrecognized saints of the Church. The Church recognizes that its tradition of canonizing saints is in a sense only the tip of an iceberg. We know that a far greater number of saints are never canonized officially. All Saints teaches us not to think of saints exclusively in terms of great and even heroic holiness. Heroes are heroes because they are exceptional. Most Christian Saints are in fact not great ascetics, monastics or Bishops. Most saints are common people just like us. Look at the martyrs of Soviet atheism for example – hundreds of thousands, even millions of them. Most of them simple believers who refused to deny Christ even at gunpoint. We have met some of these confessors who are still living.

St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, (Rom 10:9), "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God has raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved". We must avoid taking statements like this minimalistically but at the same time we must also avoid the all too common error of thinking that we must attain some idealistic level of perfection in order to be saved. Today's feast of All Saints provides us with a much needed balance and should help us maintain a humble yet confident expectation of salvation.

We should, however, expect to be tested. It is unlikely that we will have to face the kind of persecution that the martyrs encountered. Yet every day presents us what we might think of as minor or insignificant challenges to our faith and opportunities to confess, to affirm in the face of a difficulty, that Jesus Christ is Lord – of us. Most of the time that will involve a private moral struggle, like remembering that we are Christians in the face of temptation to cheat someone or say bad things about a person behind their back. But sometimes it is also necessary to declare our faith publicly. Does your family know that you are a Christian? Do your co-workers, fellow students at school and your friends and neighbors know? This is where the rubber really meets the road, you know. These are our principal arenas – where the validity of our private struggle is revealed – or not. By this I do not mean that we must demonstrate a personal holiness that we do not have and may never attain. It is enough that we confess Christ as Good

rather than ourselves and that our efforts to be good are motivated by Elder Paisios's "Philotimo", a desire to show responsive gratitude. May God grant us such gratitude by helping us to see how great and merciful He is to have called such weak and broken people into the Church, which is the community of faith, the community of the saints.

Amen