

Thomas Sunday

May 12, 2013

John 20:19-31

Good morning, Friends of God. May the Light of Christ's Holy Resurrection continue to shine brightly in each of your hearts. Christ is Risen!

In the texts of Holy Scripture, eleven appearances of the Risen Christ are recorded. Ten took place in the short period between the Resurrection itself and the Ascension. One, the appearance to St. Paul, occurs after Pentecost. The Gospel today records one of the ten, the appearance to the eleven disciples when Thomas was present. The Apostle Thomas was absent when Christ first appeared to the disciples on the day of His Resurrection but was present on the following Sunday. Commenting on this fact, St. Gregory Palamas advises Christians never to be absent from the Sunday 'Synaxis' or gathering.

To this day, the Sunday gathering of Christ's followers remains a definitive sign of those who, in every generation, can claim to be His Disciples. The modern notion that a person can be a Christian without having to 'go to church', although commonly expressed, even by Orthodox, is, nevertheless, evidence of a complete failure to understand what 'going to church' is all about.

For example, let's reflect a bit upon our recent experience of Holy Week and Pascha. First of all, we must remember that we prepared for this experience with forty days of ascetic effort – prayer, fasting, almsgiving and forgiveness. Hopefully, two things resulted from our efforts. One, we gained some degree of insight into the real condition of our hearts and were humbled a little bit by this. Two, by abstinence and increased attention to spiritual subjects we sensitized ourselves to the perception of spiritual realities. I have never met anyone who professed to his own way of worshiping God who ever did anything remotely as demanding as Great Lent. As a result, such people, even those with very good intentions, never make any significant spiritual progress.

Yet Lent, itself, is just a warm up, a preparation for a much greater ordeal of worship. Yes, ordeal. No one who has fully 'done' Holy Week will balk at the use of that term. We attempt to walk with Jesus throughout the Ordeal of His Passion. Physically, Holy Week is exhausting. Holy Week is the most arduous act of worship that we have in the Orthodox Church. It is the marathon of liturgical worship. And like the marathon, just to finish is a victory. But there is more.

Beyond the aching legs and back, beyond the physical and, even, emotional exhaustion, beyond even the personal satisfaction of having endured a great physical and psychic trial, there can, and, by God's Grace, does occur a glimpse, perhaps only a moment, but an unforgettable moment, when the soul 'sees' the Reality behind what is symbolized liturgically, and seeing, like Thomas today, falls down at the Feet of Christ and worships Him. In the timeless moment of adoration we are renewed and from that timeless moment we go forth as witnesses, ourselves, of Christ's Resurrection.

But there is more. After His Resurrection Christ continued to teach His disciples. Teach them what? What else but the full meaning of all that He had done for humanity. It is not intuitively obvious. We are rather stupid creatures, after all. This time, after the Resurrection, is, thus, very important for us, also. We need to maintain our attentiveness even in this time of celebration and be careful lest we fall into the 'it's over now' mentality. It is not over. This is a very special spiritual time and there is much to learn.

Let me share another example of this with you. I spoke with you on Holy Saturday and shared with you some spiritually edifying thoughts about the icon of Christ's Descent into Hell. In the Orthodox tradition, Hades is not simply a particular place but the dominion of death and the devil. Christ enters the realm of death, conquers it and gives every person the possibility to escape the dominion and power of death and the devil. This is the great consequence of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. How do we understand that? Might that not be a good subject of our contemplation as we bask in the Paschal Radiance?

How does this victory affect us? What difference does it make in our lives? What can we do, what should we do about it? That this event is crucial is made visible by the Church's choice of that icon as 'the' icon of the Resurrection. Our Paschal service begins with a re-enactment of this event.

St. Epiphanius of Cyprus gives us a wonderful description of Christ's Descent into Hades. In vivid words He says that Christ descended into Hell "divinely, in warlike fashion" accompanied by thousands and thousands of angels. Gabriel announced the Coming of Christ, "Lift up ye gates, O ye princes" then Michael cried, "and be ye lifted up ye everlasting doors". The power of the angels said, "stand aside, doorkeepers, outlaws" and others called out, "Break your chains, break your chains...tyrants, outlaws, be afraid". Christ appeared and caused great fear, tumult and horror. Whereupon the leaders of Hell cried out loudly, "Who is this King of Glory?". Then all the Powers of Heaven cried, "The Lord Strong and Mighty, the Lord Mighty in battle...the Lord of Powers, He is the King of Glory." (Psalm 24: 7-10)

The gates are broken and Christ, at the head of the angelic multitudes, enters in. The Light enters and all darkness is annihilated.

This drama was enacted at the doors of our church last week. You all played a part. Do you see what we are doing here? This a bit more than just 'going to church' on Sunday. This is sacred worship that liberates the souls of persons held captive by sin, whether of their own making or of fallen nature itself. This worship connects us to profound realities of which so many remain utterly ignorant.

Some will choose to remain in darkness. Their vanity binds them to delusions of what life is about. Others, however, would welcome the Light, if given the opportunity. It is to these that we all must turn our attention. For we, too, are witnesses.

May God help us - and He has and will, because Christ is Risen!