

The Sunday of the Paralytic

May 26, 2013

John 5: 1-15

Before I say anything else this morning, I would like to try and correct what may be a misunderstanding about what we usually call ‘spiritual experiences’. Last week I pointed out that the Church is Herself a living witness of Our Lord’s Resurrection and to all the Truths of the Gospel. We sing “We have seen the Resurrection” and “We have seen the True Light” and many other declarative statements in virtually all of our worship services. This does not mean that each of us, personally, has had such visions as did St. Anthony the Great who declared to the people of Alexandria, “I have seen Him”. In pointing out that there are such witnesses in every generation, Metropolitan Hierotheo, also, adds that they are always few in number.

Consider then, two things. First, the fact that such experiences, being rare and usually given only to people of very great personal holiness, are not what we should expect ourselves. There is something about our native American egalitarianism that makes it difficult for some people to accept this. We are great ones for ‘equality’ but that idea is easily perverted into a notion of sameness and uniformity. Our vanity can, also, betray us here, establishing envy rather than admiration in our hearts. In spiritual life this can create a very dangerous condition of unrealistic expectations about ourselves and about others.

Secondly, we would do well to remember that our western emphasis on individuality can blind us to the existence of our more corporate experience. This is a bigger problem for us than one might think. Our worship as Christians is always corporate. The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God”, but the modern fool has said in his heart, “I can worship God by myself and my own way”. When we bring an individualistic spirit (and we all do) to the worship of the Church, Who is the Body of Christ, we will, inevitably, experience our separation even more keenly, judging, comparing, spacing out in private reverie or feeling unworthy in an egotistical sense.

These things can be, and are, overcome through the dynamic of our liturgical worship. Indeed, the Holy services were designed with this in mind. Some of you may have noticed that I have been exhorting this congregation to become a bit more dutiful about attending and participating in our communal prayer and worship services. This is why. Many of us, also, have a desire to see our little parish grow and this is how. What experience dowe require in order to fulfill this good desire?

Here, then, is where we must abandon both the ‘Scylla’ of dumb worldliness and the ‘Charybdis’ of self centered ‘spirituality’. Only by our participation in the life of the Church and its every day practices will we, “taste and see that the Lord is Good. What does this “tasting” and this “seeing” consist of?

Abbot George of Grigoriou monastery writes about this in his little book, “Experiences of the Grace of God.” “An experience of God”, he writes, “ is, first of all, an inner assurance that through faith the Christian finds the meaning of life. He feels that this faith, “satisfies him internally and guides him...When he, thus, feels the Christian Faith inside him...God is not something external for him.”

Such a person “receives another experience of the Grace of God when he hears in his heart the invitation of God to repent for his obscure and sinful deeds, and return to the Christian life, to confess, to enter the Path of God...he starts to repent, he confesses for the first time in his life to a spiritual father. After confession he feels deep peace and joy, such as he has never felt before in his life.”

“Having repented and confessed, with fasting and spiritual preparation, we come forward to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. What do we feel after Holy Communion? Deep peace in our soul, spiritual joy. This is, also, an experience and a a visitation of the Grace of God.”

These experiences, described above by Abbot George, are obtained in and through the Life of the Church. A church that is not built upon and does not offer access to these experiences of God is a pseudo-church. A fake.

That said, let's consider, for a moment, how we, who are already united to this Sacred Body of Christ, through baptism, chrismation and Holy Communion, are to build up such a strength by these experiences so that they will allow us to both witness to our selves and be a witness to others of the Truth about Christ's Resurrection and the entire Gospel teaching.

First, witnessing to ourselves, tasting and seeing that the Lord is Good. In this it is vital that we remember that the experiences described by Abbot George must be continually renewed and deepened. Without regular, even routine maintenance, the memory of these things can fade to the point where the Gospel ceases to be a power and a guide in our lives. Father Seraphim used to say that the person who goes three days without prayer is in real danger. By prayer we do not mean an occasional "Lord, have mercy!" But a daily time of serious spiritual work. This is because the Orthodox Way of Life, when practiced in a consistent way, produces a degree of spiritual sensitivity that allows us to be aware of what is happening in our inner world, which is where the true experiences of God take place. Just coming to Liturgy on Sunday, although a good beginning, will not, without further development, achieve for us the acquisition of this sensitivity.

Secondly, witnessing to others. Once we have established an experiential foundation, not philosophy, for our Christian living, humble though it might be (and it always will be humble), we will be more likely to find ourselves possessed of the joyful courage and unselfish love that makes true Christianity attractive to others. We will, also, be more likely to find in ourselves the clarity and conviction that will allow us to withstand the relentless assaults of modern secularism. Then, we might discover in ourselves something like the transformation that the Apostles experienced between the Resurrection and Pentecost. May God grant it.

In conclusion, let me add one more thing. If the things I have been talking about are true, then, one of the most important tasks which we can set for ourselves is to acquire a solid working knowledge of Orthodox worship and a practical ability to utilize it towards these ends. Forgive me if this sounds technical or even manipulative, but at a certain level we have to know what we are doing, why we are doing it and how to do it.

At the heart of what we do as Orthodox Christians is worship, and this worship is primarily communal and takes place in what we properly call, 'The Temple'. Learning how to 'do' Orthodoxy, , not just customs and Church etiquette. thus, involves learning this way of worship. I would like to focus on this with you this summer. Not just in sermons but with some workshops that I hope will be of real help to you.

As I mentioned last week, all Orthodox renewal is liturgical and so that is where our first attention must go. This time of the Resurrection and of Pentecost is always a time of renewal in the Church. The scriptures tell us that the early Christians "continued" in the Temple daily, in the prayers, in the breaking of bread with one another and in the Apostolic doctrine. This, too, we shall do because, "Christ is Risen!"