

Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

This coming Friday the Church celebrates the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. On this day is commemorated the finding of the Cross of Christ by the saintly Empress Helen, the mother of Saint Constantine the Great.

It is a feast of great significance in our liturgical year, and for this reason the Church gives us special Epistle and Gospel readings on the Sundays both before and after the Feast.

Today, the Gospel reading was taken from St. John the Theologian, and it included one of the most famous verses in all of Holy Scripture, that world renown verse of John 3:16.

Even in today's largely secular world one cannot go long without seeing someone holding a sign saying John 3:16, whether it be at a religious demonstration, sporting event, or some other televised affair. People want to get the word out that "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

What a beautiful and powerful message. It's a message of love, self-sacrifice, and hope. It's a message which reveals both how good our God is and also how good our life can become should we be willing to believe in Jesus Christ, the One Who came "not to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved."

If there was ever an introduction to Christianity – this verse, John 3:16 is it. It is a call to eternal life, it is the invitation to the wedding feast which we heard about in last week's parable. It is truly a verse worthy of being shared with the whole world, for God wills that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

And so the question becomes, "How am I, how are we, carrying this message into the world?" "How are we sharing our faith that Jesus Christ has come to give us eternal life?" "How are we witnessing to this Good News, this Gospel?"

Well, first it should be said that whether we know it or not, we all are witnesses to Jesus Christ in one way or another. In fact, one cannot even come to church on Sunday morning without providing a witness to the world.

In the same way, when people see us wearing crosses around our necks or making the sign of the Cross in a restaurant we are witnessing to our faith.

But how else do we witness to our faith?

Well we witness to our faith in how we live our lives – the decisions we make, the way we speak, what we do, how we do it, where we go, where we don't go, etc. The ordinary actions of our lives, our day-to-day activities, witness to what is in our minds and hearts, to what we believe.

Theologically speaking this is that great connection between faith and works. If our faith is alive, if it is real, then it will manifest itself in our works. If we truly believe in Jesus Christ then we will act upon this faith – we will live out our lives, in every minute detail, in a manner befitting our high calling as Christians. And just the same, if our faith is somehow not what it should be, then our works will follow – we will live out our lives in a manner which does not witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

St. James, the Brother of the Lord and first bishop of Jerusalem, writes extensively in his Epistle about the relationship between faith and works. And he tells us the necessity of having both – that we must have faith and we must show our faith by our works. Otherwise, he says, our faith will be like that of the demons, who believe and tremble but do not practice the ways of God. And then to understand this relationship between faith and works better, St. James gives us an image. He says consider how the body lives when it is energized by the soul. Well what happens when the soul departs? The body dies. So too faith without works is dead.

Now, as Orthodox Christians, we know all of this. We know that our faith must be acted upon for it to be of benefit to us – for our faith to be a saving faith. So the question for us today is, "How can we better put our faith into practice? How can we better live out and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that others will themselves be encouraged to turn to the Lord?"

This is a question that has as many answers as there are people here today. Each of us must examine our lives to see if how we live reflects what we believe – and for those of us who are clergy, if we practice what we preach.

And most likely, if we examine ourselves we'll see that while in some areas of our lives we do witness to the Gospel, in other areas there might be some room for improvement. Recognizing this fact, by the way, is a sign of spiritual maturity because it shows humility. And this type of self-examination also paves the way for spiritual growth because none of us wants anything weighing on our conscience and we know that the only way to alleviate our conscience is to correct whatever shortcomings we may have.

Now when we make this spiritual inventory with honesty and humility, most likely, we'll find that we fall short in a number of ways. And usually we fall short in keeping the hardest of commandments – the commandments to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to forgive and forget, and to deny ourselves, take up our Cross and follow Christ.

These are the hardest types of commandments because they go against what the world teaches us. The world says to strike back at those who strike you, to destroy your enemies or at least avoid them as much as possible, to seek justice or revenge rather

than forgiving and forgetting, and to pursue whatever makes us happy no matter what the cost or who it hurts.

Yet, if we can bring ourselves to practice these commandments of Christ, we will find that through God's help and our own steadfast determination, not only will we little by little take hold of that eternal life which is offered to us, but we will also find that we will be giving what is quite possibly the best witness we ever could to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We will be giving the best witness because people will see something different about us, they will see that we are not living our lives after the ways of the world, but rather according to a higher standard, according to the ways of God. This is the type of witness that has the power to change lives because it is this type of witness which catches peoples' attention.

When people see us forgiving and forgetting even when someone has hurt us badly, or offering to those in need with no hope of receiving anything in return, or turning the other cheek to someone who was cut us off on the road, or fasting from certain types of food in honor of the sufferings of our Lord, they say to themselves, why are they doing this? What is going on in their lives that let's them live this way? And then they begin to sense something otherworldly, they begin to see the power of the Gospel, they begin to glimpse the Kingdom of God already present in this world.

This is how we can provide a true witness to Jesus Christ, by putting into practice the commandments of the Lord even when it hurts to do so. By doing this we show that we are committed to the Lord's Kingdom and His ways, even when it is unpopular to do so or when it means that we will have to suffer a little for His sake.

Remember, what is so jolting about the verse John 3:16 is that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son up to death upon the Cross. This is the true witness, this is true martyrdom. And why is this necessary? Because this is the only thing which can lead a person to leave behind the world – love to the point of death.

This is why the Lord said that when He is lifted up on the Cross He would draw all men to Himself. For people would see His obedience and self-sacrificial love even to the point of death, and they like the centurion, who stood by the Cross, would cry out, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

Brothers and sisters, through the Cross the Lord Jesus Christ became the First Witness to His Father's love. Let us follow the Lord's example, exhibiting that love, which empowers us to fulfill the commandments even to the point of death. If we are able to do this, if we are able to fulfill this commandment of love even when it hurts to do so, two things will happen. We will taste the sweetness of eternal life, and we will provide that witness to the Lord which alone can help lead others to leave behind the world and its ways for the sake of God's Heavenly Kingdom.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.