

Sunday After 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!

Just last Sunday we spoke about the necessity of having both faith and works in our Christian lives. And we saw that in order to witness to the Gospel, or Good News, of Jesus Christ we have to not only commit ourselves to a firm trust in the Lord but also commit ourselves to practicing His life-giving commandments.

As we know, the commands of the Lord are many, and can be found throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the most famous of the commandments are the Ten which were given to the Prophet Moses on Mount Sinai. And in the New Testament the most well known are those given by the Lord Himself in His Sermon on the Mount.

The difference between these two sets of commandments is as great as the difference between the two places where the commandments were given. Moses received the Ten Commandments in the heart of the desert, in a dry and barren place, where there was no water and nature itself was all but lifeless. While Christ delivered His Sermon on a flourishing mountain which overlooked the Sea of Galilee, in a region that is not only full of life, but perhaps even the most fertile and beautiful in all of the Holy Land.

The commandments of the Old Testament were given as a means to cut off sin, as a means to purify the Israelite people before entering into the Promise Land. Remember the Israelite people had spent many years in Egypt under the influence of a pagan people. Many of them had forgotten the Lord and had turned to the worship of idols. They had digressed spiritually, forgetting that they were a chosen nation called into a special covenant with God. And so the Lord, when He had led them out of Egypt, gave them commandments to get back on track, to prepare them to enter into the Promise Land, and most importantly to prepare them for the Messiah who was to come.

Now the commandments of Christ on the other hand, which we have in the New Testament, were given not so much to cut off sin as they were to give new life by teaching mankind how to live as God Himself lives. The Lord's commandments were given to take man to the highest level of morality and spirituality; so that man might partake of the beautify and life of God, so that man might become perfect as God Himself is perfect.

Now if one were to take all these commandments from the Old and New Testaments, extracting them from the Holy Scriptures, separating them from historical events of our salvation, and placing them in their own book, one would have, if you will, a moral and spiritual handbook for Christian living. A moral and spiritual handbook instructing us to live as God Himself lives.

Of course, the first chapter of this book would correspond to the first commandment, the necessity of loving God with one's whole mind, soul, heart, and strength. And the second chapter would correspond to the second commandment, which teaches that we must love our neighbor as our self. Likewise, the third chapter might be devoted to caring for the poor, or the benefits of fasting, or the peace and strength which come from prayer.

But what about the commandment which we heard in today's Gospel reading, the commandment to deny oneself, take up one's cross, and follow Christ? Where would we find this commandment?

Well the Fathers tell us that this teaching of the Lord is the call of the Gospel compacted into one sentence. It is the main gist, the very essence, of what we do as Christians. They tell us that this commandment to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Christ, must accompany us from the very beginning of the spiritual life to the very end, for everything we do in the Christian life is not only patterned after the example of Jesus Christ, but it is also empowered by His divine grace which is at work within us.

And so, if we had to place this commandment somewhere in the moral and spiritual handbook of Christian living, perhaps the most fitting place would be in the very beginning, as the introduction or preface, even before any of the other chapters.

And of course, if we think about it, this really would be the most appropriate place. For nothing in the Christian life can be accomplished without the willingness to give up our own imperfect will in order to follow God's perfect plan, without a desire to deny the world and its ways for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

We see this most clearly in Baptism, the Sacrament of initiation into the Christian life. When we are immersed three times in the waters of Baptism we die to the old man and put on the new Man. The first time we enter the water we die with Christ to sin, death, and the devil, the second time we are buried with Him in the tomb, and the third time we rise with Him to newness of life. And when we immerge we immediately begin our walk with Jesus Christ as the choir sings, "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

This is the mystery of Baptism for it incorporates us into the life of Christ. First, we die to the old man, and then we enter into the life of the New Man, Jesus Christ, and He Himself enters into our life. This is exactly what St. Paul is talking about when he says in today's epistle, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

You see, St. Paul had a most profound understanding of the Cross of Jesus Christ. And this is because he understood two very important things.

First, St. Paul understood that it is only through the Cross of Jesus Christ that we are saved. We are not saved by our good works. We are not saved by being good people.

We are saved by the Cross of Jesus Christ. This is why St. Paul wrote to the Galatians that “man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ... by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me... for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” So the first thing St. Paul understood was that it is faith in the crucified Jesus Christ which justifies.

Now, the second thing St. Paul understood was that while we are saved through the Cross, the benefits of the Cross of Christ must be actualized in the life of the Christian. In other words, what Christ had accomplished in His victory over sin, death, and the devil, must be realized personally in the life of each and every one of the Lord's followers.

This is why St. Paul asked the following question, he says “But what if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin?” And he answers the question himself saying, “Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, [and St. Paul is speaking here about a life of sin] then,” he says, “I make myself a transgressor.” That is I separate myself from the life and justification which Jesus Christ had come to give me.

This is why, as St. James says in his Epistle, both faith and works are necessary. Faith justifies and works actualizes. Faith in what Jesus Christ has accomplished justifies us, the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection. And the presence of Jesus Christ working within us through our Baptism actualizes this victory for us on a personal level. And so, faith in Jesus Christ justifies, and Jesus Christ working within us actualizes our salvation.

Finally, brothers and sisters, as we see the Cross before us today, let us like St. Paul have a deep and profound understanding and appreciation of how central it must be in our Christian lives.

Let us remember that the Cross is not only the means by which Jesus Christ has overcome sin, death, and the devil, 2000 years ago on Golgotha, but let us also remember that the Cross is the means by which Jesus Christ incorporates each and every one of us into His victory, every single day of our lives.

Each time we chose to turn away from sin, by letting go of anger, by being less selfish, by enduring hardship and temptation with patience, by forgiving and forgetting, by turning the other cheek, by loving our enemies, we are dying more and more to the old man. The man of sin is being crucified within us, nailed to the Cross of the Lord.

And as the old man dies, the new man is rising within us, each and every day, beginning with the day of our Baptism. And as Jesus Christ continually increases His presence within us, He teaches and helps us more and more to fulfill His life-giving commandments, the love of God, the love of one's neighbor, and all the rest which lead us along the road to becoming perfect as God Himself is perfect.

This is what the Lord wills to accomplish within us and this is why He tells us that “whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.”

Let us, like St. Paul, and all the true followers of Jesus, be crucified with Christ, willingly losing the life subject to corruption by dying to the ways of sin, so that we might save our life by rising with the Lord to newness of life, both now and in the age to come. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!