

“The Hidden Glory of the Cross Planted in the Heart of the Christian Believer”

Sermon Delivered for the Service of the Salutations to the Holy Cross

With Metropolitan Gerasimos and the Greek Orthodox Community

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Introduction

About 25 years ago a large bronze sculpture was installed in our cathedral depicting the Crucifixion of Christ. It is a very dramatic work, with the Mother of God kneeling at her Son's feet and the centurion with his lance mounted on a horse, about to pierce the side of the dead Jesus. The rector of the cathedral at the time was somewhat alarmed to see that the artist had not put a nail into Christ's feet. There are large nails in the hands, but none in the feet.

He was concerned about this apparent oversight and contacted the sculptor in Italy. The artist assured him that it was no mistake. He had intentionally not put a nail there. Why? The artist explained to the priest, “I gave a slight upward thrust to the body of Christ on the Cross to suggest the beginning of the Resurrection; a nail put there would draw the viewer's eye back down.” The artist knew his theology well: in the Gospel of St. John, “the hour” of Jesus is both the hour of his humiliating death and of his glorious, life-giving Resurrection. Of course, it takes faith to perceive the mystery of Easter beneath the sorrow of Good Friday, and it is our shared faith in the power of Christ's Cross that brings us together in prayer this evening.

The Cross of Glory in the Heart of Lent

In the liturgical tradition of the Roman Rite, the fourth Sunday of Lent is a kind of oasis midway through our Lenten pilgrimage: brighter vestments are worn, flowers adorn the sanctuary, and the first word in the liturgy is: “Rejoice, O Jerusalem!” For this reason the day is referred to as “Laetare Sunday,” that is, “Rejoice.” In addition, in the Roman observance of Lent the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday is always one of the Synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration. In this way the Christian faithful are given a reminder of the glory of the Resurrection that lies beyond the Cross, and are encouraged to go forward with hope to the encounter with the Lord's Paschal Mystery.

I perceive the same awareness in the Lenten tradition of the Greek Church. The Third Sunday of Great Lent is marked by the Veneration of the Holy Cross, likewise an anticipation of the Resurrection. The Cross is planted in the midst of your own Lenten pilgrimage to offer refreshment and joy. It says in the *Synaxarion* for that Sunday:

As they who walk on a long and hard way and are bowed down by fatigue find great relief and strengthening under the cool shade of a leafy tree, so do we find comfort, refreshment, and rejuvenation under the Life-giving Cross, which our Holy Fathers ‘planted’ on this

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Sunday. Thus, we are fortified and enabled to continue our Lenten journey with a light step, rested and encouraged.

The world is puzzled indeed that we should draw refreshment from an instrument of cruel and painful execution, but for us as believers it is precisely by embracing the agony of the Cross that we are given eternal life, “trampling down death by death.”

The rich liturgical traditions of both of our communions celebrate this reality. I would like to reflect briefly on a few themes found in the Veneration of the Holy Cross on the Third Sunday of Great Lent which find their echo in the Roman liturgy. Scripture presents us with the image of the Tree of Life planted in the middle of the garden, and the Holy Cross likewise planted in the middle of your Lenten season. In the Office of Readings in our Latin liturgy (the Office prayed in the middle of the night or very early in the morning), the antiphon which we pray at the very beginning of the four-week cycle of psalms makes a bold declaration: “See how the Cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life!” The Cross is truly like the tree spoken of in the first psalm: planted beside running waters, it produces fruit in due season. How does it produce its fruit? Where Adam snatched at equality with God and seized the forbidden fruit in Eden, the New Adam, the Son of God, willingly laid aside his glory and became obedient even unto death, to death on the Cross. In the same hour of the Office of Readings for Holy Saturday, we listen to these words addressed to us by Christ taken from an ancient homily:

See my hands, nailed firmly to a tree, for you who once wickedly stretched out your hand to a tree. I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in hell. The sword that pierced me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you.

It is this self-sacrificing love unto death that gives power to the Cross. It is this love that is stronger than death that produces the fruit of eternal life from the barren tree on Calvary.

The Orthodox liturgy sees this Cross held up as a royal standard of victory, an image captured in a beautiful mosaic dating back to the sixth century in Ravenna, Italy: Christ is shown carrying his Cross to Golgotha, but he is robed in royal purple and the Cross is adorned with jewels. Around the same time that this mosaic was made, the Byzantine Emperor Justin II sent a relic of the True Cross to the Frankish queen Radeconde for her abbey of the Holy Cross in Poitiers. It is consoling to think of Christians of East and West united centuries ago by their veneration of the Cross, as we come together to do the same this evening. The Bishop of Poitiers, Venantius Fortunatus, composed a hymn for the occasion, one which we use frequently in the final weeks of Lent:

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1. Abroad the Regal Banners fly,
Now shines the Cross's mystery;
Upon it Life did death endure,
And yet by death did life procure.

2. Who, wounded with a direful spear,
Did, purposely to wash us clear
From stain of sin, pour out a flood
Of precious Water mixed with Blood.

3. That which the Prophet-King of old
Hath in mysterious verse foretold,
Is now accomplished, while we see
God ruling nations from a Tree.
4. O lovely and refulgent Tree,
Adorned with purpled majesty;
Culled from a worthy stock, to bear
Those Limbs which sanctifiéd were.

5. Blest Tree, whose happy branches bore
The wealth that did the world restore;
The beam that did that Body weigh
Which raised up hell's expected prey.

6. Hail, Cross, of hopes the most sublime!
Now in this mournful Passion time,
Improve religious souls in grace,
The sins of criminals efface.

7. Blest Trinity, salvation's spring,
May every soul Thy praises sing;
To those Thou grantest conquest by
The holy Cross, rewards apply. Amen.

The *Synaxarion* also refers to an incident that took place during the Exodus from Egypt into the Promised Land in relation to the connection our service tonight has with these Lenten observances of our two Churches:

The present feast has been placed in the middle of Great Lent for another reason. The Fast can be likened to the spring of Marah whose waters the children of Israel encountered in the wilderness. This water was undrinkable due to its bitterness but became sweet when the Holy Prophet Moses dipped the wood into its depth. Likewise, the wood of the Cross sweetens the days of the Fast, which are bitter and often grievous because of our tears. Yet Christ comforts us during our course through the desert of the Fast,

guiding and leading us by His hand to the spiritual Jerusalem on high by the power of His Resurrection.

Christ’s Pierced Side, the Wellspring of Salvation

Let us contemplate those bitter waters for a moment. They were produced when Moses struck the rock. That incident brings me back to the event portrayed in the sculpture in St. Mary’s Cathedral: the centurion with his lance poised to pierce the side of the dead Christ. St. Paul tells us that the rock from which the water flowed was Christ, and that this rock followed the Israelites all through their sojourn in the desert (1 Cor 10:4).

What did Our Lord himself tell us of this mystery? When speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (Jn 4:10). “The water that I shall give will become in you a spring welling up to eternal life” (see Jn 4:14). This is the first promise: the human Jesus is tired and thirsty, but he offers the divine gift of eternal life.

A few chapters later, Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths. That feast takes place in the autumn, and concluded with prayers for the gift of needed rain in the months ahead. It is in that context that we can understand the meaning of Christ’s words, spoken in a loud voice to the throngs gathered near the Temple: “If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow waters of living water’” (Jn 7:37-38). The Evangelist goes on to explain that Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit, who had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified.

When is Jesus glorified in St. John’s Gospel? At his hour. And his hour is the hour of his death. We read in chapter nineteen that the dying Jesus cried out, “I thirst” (as he had said earlier to the woman at the well); he received a taste of vinegar; then he announced, “It is finished,” and gave over his spirit. It is then that the soldier pierces his side, and at once blood and water flow out. The mystery of Moses striking the rock is fulfilled: the side of the dead Christ, the Christ who died experiencing our human thirst, is pierced, and from it flows the waters of eternal life.

Our faith in the Cross is faith in the love of Christ who tasted death for our sake, and made it the source of divine life. Our religion is serious, but it is not gloomy: we go through the Lenten season of self-denial to share in some small way in Christ’s sufferings, and we unite our other, often greater sufferings, with his, because we know that divine love transforms death into life. The Cross, an image so horrible that many in the ancient world would never even speak of it, has become the Tree of Life.

Persecuted Christians

And yet, we realize how miniscule our own sufferings are as we look around the world and take note of what is happening in the lives of so many of our fellow believers. Indeed, we become painfully aware that all this is far from some sort of abstract theology or pietistic musings. We cannot but be deeply grieved by the plight of so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who, in the Middle East and elsewhere, literally repeat the Passion and death of Our Lord in their bodies. Just last week four Missionaries of Charity who ran a home for the aged in Yemen, founded by Mother Theresa of Calcutta herself, along with the cook at the facility, were seized by ISIS terrorists, tied to trees, and executed. They embody for us the goodness of Our Lord and his Paschal Mystery: doing only good, spreading love and peace to all, regardless of religious affiliation, but despised by a small fanatical sect who perversely distort their own religious tradition to justify eliminating all those who are different from them, even despite the good that they do.

How many more of our fellow Christians (and other religious minorities) have been displaced, live in terror, or have, like these sisters of ours, paid the ultimate price for their fidelity to Christ? Indeed, so many that we have lost count. Where is the outrage over these atrocities? Where is the righteous indignation? Where are the calls by the pertinent international monitoring agencies for the perpetrators of such horrendous acts of brutality to be brought to justice? The silence of the West in the face of such assaults on its cultural and spiritual patrimony, the very source of the greatness of its civilization, condemns it.

But our faith gives us a deeper perspective. We see here, before our very eyes, once again the Cross of the Lord standing revealed as the Tree of Life. Death is not the end; rather, a crown of glory awaits those who remain faithful to the end. And there is no greater glory than that of martyrdom. To our brothers and sisters who have paid the ultimate price for their Christian faith, Our Lord hands the palm branch of victory.

Conclusion

This is our common faith, the faith of Orthodox and Catholic Christians, descendents of those same Fathers of East and West who “planted” the Life-giving Cross into the heart of our liturgies because it stands at the heart of the mystery of our life in Christ. Allow me to conclude with some words of praise written by Rabanus Maurua, a ninth-century Benedictine monk, words which echo the sentiments of so many Fathers of the Eastern Church as well:

It is fitting to call to mind what great fruits the wood of the holy Cross brings forth on its shoots: its fruit is eternal and its root everlasting; its fragrance fills the world and its taste satisfies the faithful; its brightness outshines the sun and its whiteness makes the snow seem dark; its tip pierces the vault of the heavens and its base penetrates the underworld; its weakness exalts the humblest

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things, and its power crushes the mightiest. Through it and with it the charm of all the virtues in the world is gathered together, because in it all things reach perfection.¹... In the Cross redemption from death is accomplished, conversion to holiness of life is manifested, the perfection of virtues is set forth, resurrection to eternal life is promised, the attainment of everlasting glory and true joy are hoped for.²

¹ PL 107:173A; *De laudibus sanctae crucis*, 1.6.

² PL 107:217A; *De laud.* 1.17.