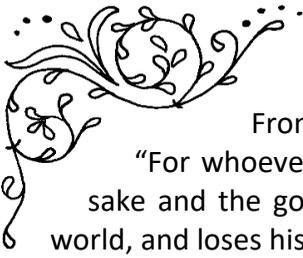


Sunday of the Holy Cross - 22 March 2020
Tone 7



From today's gospel of Mark 8

“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul”

Kontakion from Triodion.

The fiery sword is not guarding the entrance to Eden anymore. For it was extinguished in paradoxical manner by the tree of the Cross. The sting of death and the victory of Hades have been stricken. And You, my Savior, came and cried out to those in Hades: Enter again into Paradise.

We reach, in the middle of lent, the middle of the earth, to behold the cross. To see the destruction of hell and man’s difficulty to partake of the resurrection. To wake up and come out. It is painful. Because to behold the cross means also to look in the eyes of the One who loves us the most. To see how deep we hurt Him in His total vulnerability. God is not only crucified by man but also humiliated, abandoned, mocked. All our frustrated anger, that comes from failing Him and each other, choosing death instead of life, is revealed by the cross. Christ received all this anger in the most violent way. That’s the best way we can say “I love you too”. At the present time. That’s how we best tempt God so He would not forgive us - *“...but He was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin...”*-. *“But the Lord hath sworn and will not repent”*.

The cross does not let us see only what we share with God. It is the mirror of our own life. When we refuse any signs of love and kindness bestowed on us. When we refuse and we inflict pain on those who are kind with us. But this is the place we share with God the most. The cross unroots the anger from within us. By letting us see and accept the forgiveness of those we love and hurt the most. The cross brings you to the footstool of those who are wounded by our lack of care. Their vulnerability and poverty becomes our own garment too, when we long for their forgiveness. And we recognize here there is nothing else we can control anymore. When you are begging for forgiveness, you let go of the power that crucifies people and choose the path of humility, the path of the cross. We become vulnerable in our own weaknesses. Seeing clearly what we have done. But trusting in His mercy we follow Him from afar. And as we come closer and as we lean to forgive, when we notice a little bit Christ' light yoke for us. And we rejoice and weep for joy.

THE DIARY OF A WIMPY PRIEST IN TIMES OF AFFLICTIONS

Thoughts of the week

Oikos.

On Golgotha did Pilate lift up crosses three: two for those guilty of larceny, and one for Him who gives us life, whom Hades spied and voiced to those below, "My ministers and governors: my heart! - who has affixed it with a nail? A lance of wood abruptly pierced me through, and I am rent in twain. My inner parts distressingly are pained, my belly aches, the organs of my senses. My breathing pants and am compelled Adam and those of Adam to expel, who by a tree were given me.

On Friday, after we cleaned the entrance doors of the mission with Detoll (reminding me of a scene from the classic movie about Moses, before exodus), we were getting ready to close, just after 4pm. A person on the street wanted to know what was going on inside. I said we share food and welcome people and listen to them in different ways. We offer some counselling, we make bread next door and other things, while socially distancing from each other. He replied he was a man in need and he would come for breakfast to eat. He also said he knew about counselling, he had that experience at length and it taught him well enough that when he was inside and felt his head spinning, he should go outside for a walk. He continued sharing with me on the spot that he had attempted suicide six times. And with all this isolation going on around, he might not share his intentions with anybody the following time. He was not dramatic or emotional. Just sharing his story and his heavy cross with a strange priest. We shared our names and a coffee in the bakery. He promised he would come for breakfast and hopefully chat more.

I did not read much news during the virus crisis. Just because it seems that all communications look the same. From social services to the city of Toronto, from government to church authorities, everything looks like the copy paste version of the other. We are asked to wash our hands and keep a distance. We might think the Truth is simple. Yes, I would agree with that. But the meaning is deep. That's why nobody made any reference to the readings for the week, from Genesis, Isaiah and Proverbs. One thing I did read that touched me was that it is not our faith that is at risk these days but the faithful. Our faith has flesh and bones. A body who needs care and nurturing. A suffering body of Christ, like the church today, and many other things, who are in need for healing. That's what we have seen here and confessed within our own community for a long time. The human soul has a body and both need care and nurturing.

But the question is, how healthy were we before the virus came? Was our life pleasing to God?

The virus can hopefully wake up our immune system which is compassion. Otherwise more damage will follow. It did stop clinics who were performing euthanasia in the Netherlands and Canada. We hope and pray that more life threatening systems will close.

The truth here in Toronto - I don't know about other countries who enjoy the freedom of having an orthodox majority- is that our neighbors were already dying. The assisted suicide initiative (euthanasia) was galoping towards its goal, to eradicate the most vulnerable ones. Life is wounded and killed from the womb, by numbers we don't even know. In a rich city, more and more homeless people are abandoned on the streets. Those who suffer from addictions are given over to harm reduction that keeps them captive. The jobs that pay you well make you a slave to the social liberal values of these times and so on. I could continue and mention the way young people are not inspired to choose the path of marriage anymore, or how families are affected by addictions. With no communities to welcome you, both faithful people and atheists are afflicted by isolation that became epidemic way before the virus arrived. Not much attention was given to all these aspects because the economy was doing fine. Whatever that means. But we know through the gospel that this should not be our concern. This is the worry of the world. We know that our concern is that humanity was at risk before and that the virus does not do anything else but uncover our depressive comfort. And our greed, which showed up first when we panicked about toilet paper and bought it in large quantities - *"My inner parts distressingly are pained, my belly aches, the organs of my senses"*.

Yes, we should not be afraid that our faith is at risk - even though with the lack of compassion I wonder about that too - but that the faithful were dying. The problem is they have been dying for a long time with not much of a reaction when it comes to faith. What we see today, as always with the cross, is that those who are the most vulnerable are dying first. Like usual. Let's pray that our heart would not be chastised like the one of the pharaoh, but would listen to the Word of God to let go of what became a rich burden that tempts us with death.

II

Another thing I noticed this week was that the Canadian government identified the "essential services" in a time of crisis. What is really essential for living. We realised once more, as we had been aware for a long time, that the government does not really think churches are essential services. Like the communists, they think religion is rather a drug. The communist regime feared drugs for they poisoned peoples' minds; therefore churches were persecuted and today we rejoice at the witness of the martyrs. Nowadays, in Canada, the culture of drugs is flourishing, so we needn't worry, we are safe here as a church. But not in the middle of a real crisis. Everything must be shut down, we shall reopen when it all goes back to "normal". The surprise came from the church, which does not see itself as an essential service either. Judging by the large space some churches have inside, social distancing wouldn't have been a

problem. We seemed to be doing pretty well in this regard before the virus appeared. There even used to be some canons which banned people from receiving communion if they coughed during the service. These would have come in handy in these tough times.

III

Is it worthed to repent as a generation? Does the church have anything to do with that?

We heard this week words of hope as well. In our wisdom we see that God asks us for repentance. To go deep into the desert and fast. From relationships, from our comfort, from our lifestyle. That sounds interesting. Let's try that. Let's go to the desert and fast as Jesus did. Is our fast though similar to the one of the Lord. We hear today in the epistle that Christ was tempted as us but He is sinless. God does not need repentance. He swore he would never repent. He goes into the desert to show us His steadfast love. When God takes us into the desert, He does so in order to take us out from our captivity. To take us from Babylon or Egypt and to bring us to a large place. So, God does not repent, but man has to. He takes us from D (death) to L (life).

So if we do need to repent, the question for all the churches is: what do we need to repent for? We need to show leadership here because we are the ones talking all day about repentance. The world would not know how to do that. Because all of us became non essential in a time of crisis. So, what do we really need to repent for in order to become relevant when things really happen around us? This is a real question if we really want to go into the desert as a church and as a nation for this generation. Do we want to go so we can come back? Then it is better not to leave in the first place.

We go in order to leave something behind; the old ways of believing so that we can find fresh water and sweet bread. If we do not look for new life, then it is better to stay home because the risk is to add more despair to an already dying patient. If you do not really repent and look for new life in a dying structure that has preserved our comfort so far, we'll spread more pain on those who are already suffering.

Yes, let's go to the desert but never come back from where we left. Otherwise, God will keep us there until a new nation will be born. Again and again, let's go indeed to the desert. And look for His signs, that show us how to do that well.

IV

Eyes have they and shall not see. (Please read Ps 134)

Another thing unveiled was that our human body needs to come back to its senses. We were paralyzed by the attractions to all kinds of demons. We cannot see each other because we watch screens too much. We cannot listen to each other, because we take part in gossiping that poisons our lives. We became strangers to each other because our jobs made us slaves,

sucking away all our energy. We cannot see the sick because we are obsessed with our quality of life. It is almost impossible *to live simply in Toronto so others can simply live*. Trust us on this one, we are trying and it is not easy. In spite of all that, I do believe this could be a time of healing for families and for all of us. It puts a stop to our self destructing lifestyle. There is time to be with each other like never before. For younger people, there is time to realise that the elders are vulnerable and need their care. For the older, there is time to see the foolishness of the younger and offer them guidance. There is an invitation to a different life. As usual, this happens with a price. At the expense of the most vulnerable ones. But they were already dying before. Now, we can see their eyes, ask for forgiveness and learn compassion. It is the door Christ opens for us to come out of our hell and to witness life. This will inspire others.

However, it seems that the path of denial is more tempting. To take refuge in the virtual world. To work from home and self isolate online (internet usage increased by 30% in Toronto), to watch more Netflix (the stocks for Netflix are skyrocketing), to be sensitive on social media and get into even more panic at the fact that the virus was discovered in animals as well, to use alcohol and recreational drugs (the use of marijuana is higher than ever). This is a powerful demon for our time. We need a virus that can change our online world. Which is not real. (I am saying this as I type these words on a laptop). I don't know what it takes to bring it down but we should have hope. I am afraid though that the withdrawal from it might put the life of the patient at risk. Even so, Christ tells us today not to try to save our life but to do everything for the sake of the Gospel and his love.

V

The fall is real and painful. A homeless person shared with me before the presanctified liturgy on Wednesday how he discovered unknown levels of humility within himself. He lost his good job last year, and after being infected with HIV he found himself on the street. The humility did not come from the suffering and fear he experienced, as I wrongly thought for myself. But from all the kindness he received in his vulnerability from those who were on the street and as afflicted as he was.

So much so, that he saw all of that. He came to the realisation that all that kindness and care was coming to him from God. Through vulnerable people. He told me crying that, being homeless, he felt like the richest person in the world because he discovered the love of God for him and His care. All this experience pushed him to look for treatment for HIV. He did not care so much when he still had his job. He had lived a careless life, without worrying that he was on the path of self-destruction. I think of his witness as an icon of what we are living today. God takes us from our seductive, self destructive world, that we created in the wilderness, to teach us His love for us. To show us what it means to care. What it means to eat without consuming and drink without being drunk. He gives us time to reintroduce Himself to

us. He gives us manna and sweet water. There will be plenty. Let us keep vigil and receive them with gratitude and trust Him wherever He takes us so we don't spend a whole generation wondering.

Mission Church Collections Mar 15, 2020:
 Donations \$2130, candle/wine \$60, Candle box \$90.95, Mission \$50

You can purchase an offering of wine for liturgy and candles to keep the flame from Jerusalem Holy Sepulchre burning in the chapel for your intention every Sunday after liturgy.

Please sing along and do not stay outside the chapel there is lots of room inside for you.



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We are an apostolate of the ecumenical patriarchate "Mother Church of Christ's poor" under the Omophorion of Metropolitan Gregory of Nyssa

Wednesday	11:30 am	Prayers	Friday	7:00 am	Orthros/Divine Liturgy
	4:00 pm	Vespers/Dinner		11:30 am	Prayers
	6 pm	Bridges		3:00 pm	Jesus Prayer
	7:30 pm	Compline			
Thursday	11:30 am	Prayers	Sunday	8:30 am	Orthros
	3:00 pm	Jesus Prayer		10:00 am	Divine Liturgy/Reader Service followed by Agape meal