

HOMILY FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT 2015

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

Glory Be To Jesus Christ! Slava Isusu Christu!

This past Friday, I had an interesting meeting at a coffee shop in New Haven, with a young man who wanted to learn about the Orthodox Church. I spent the good part of almost three hours answering his questions and trying to the best of my ability to help him get a sense of what Orthodoxy is all about. We spoke about a great many things, but when I reflect back on our conversation, what stands out the most to me was when I described the Orthodox way of life, in the words of St. Paul as putting on Christ.

When we become a Christian and are baptized we make a commitment to grow in the likeness of Christ, we commit our selves to pattern our lives after Him, to walk in his ways as the Psalmist David so beautifully writes. Yes as Orthodox Christians we do accept Jesus as our Saviour, and a personal one at that. But that acceptance is a life long event. Each and every day we must respond to that call to accept Jesus as the King and Lord of our Life. Orthodoxy is all about that, it is all about following Christ and in everything we do, trying to act like Him, and look like Him and sound like Him. We are literally called to be living Icons of Jesus Christ. Those who come in contact with us, should be able to sense this without our actually having to say words. Like Blessed Augustine, was once quoted as saying, Preach in season and out of season and sometimes use words.

Everything we do in the Orthodox Church, all of the hymns we sing, the services we pray, all of the fasting we do and the good works, we do, is all part of this process of putting on Christ, of becoming more like him. We need the fasting and the prayers and the services and especially the Holy Mysteries, Holy confession, The Eucharist and Holy Unction to help redirect our minds and hearts, which constantly stray from the straight and narrow way that leads to the Kingdom.

This putting on of Christ, is Glorious. And we know how wonderful it feels when we feel Christ near to us... when we feel the peace of God which passes all understanding when we really are given the gift of prayer, or are moved by one of the Divine services, or when we see how we were able to make Christ and his Mercy and love present to someone in need. We all to one degree or another have experienced it, I am sure.

However, there is a very difficult side to the putting on of Christ, that all of us are all too familiar with, that of participating in suffering and struggle. This is the difficult side of being an Orthodox Christian. On the one hand we experience the majesty of God and on the other, we or someone we love experience at times great pain and suffering. When this happens to someone we love, we often say or think that overused Cliché, “Why does bad things happen to good people” Why do godly people suffer? I must admit, it was hard to see someone as holy and kind, and decent as, for example Helen Rowland, undergo so much pain. She literally was in constant pain, with a deteriorating shoulder, with a socket that was bone on bone. No one knew how much she suffered from this

physical pain and emotional pain of not being well enough to drive and continue to do all of the acts of kindness to others that she liked. If we look to other members of our parish both those who have gone on to their just reward, or those who are still with us today, have we not seen a lot of pain and suffering? Good decent people struggling so mightily. So much so that one of us struggling with sickness recently described our parish, with a bit of good humor as the Church of the walking wounded. Its true and while we might chuckle a bit, if we dwell on it too much, I am sure the tears will start flowing.

To what purpose is all of this? we might ask God in earnest. Is this a punishment, and if so for what? Why Lord when I pray to you won't you heal me or my loved one? I come to Church every week, I try to do the best I can, you have healed others why not me or my loved one? When we ask this question, we need to keep in mind the image of our Lord, the suffering servant, the King of Glory, nailed to the Cross. What did he do that was wrong? We can say unequivocally. Nothing! Was it fair that He who created the heavens and the earth out of love, was mocked and spit upon and physically tortured. Of Course not. So we describe the pain and suffering that our Lord and we sometimes go through as the Mystery of Suffering. Now lets for a moment, think about the word Mystery. We use this term in the Church to describe the Sacraments . We speak of the Mystery of Repentance, the Mystery of Confession, The Mystery of the Eucharist. A Holy Mystery or Sacrament is a means of Communion with God. So understood in this context, suffering although not part of God's plan, is a vehicle for communing with God. When we suffer and experience pain of the body, soul, heart and mind, we begin to

understand the pain and suffering our Lord voluntarily suffered, for you and I. With ours only being a small fraction of his pain. Of all of the many pastoral experiences I have had in my 21 years of ministry to this community as priest, the most powerful ones are those that have been associated with the mystery of suffering. I remember one occasion where, many years ago I was privileged to see beneath the veil of this mystery of suffering. Once, when I was giving Communion to someone with terminal cancer that metastasized to the bones, who was in excruciating pain, something incredible happened. A great wave of peace came over us in the home where the visitation took place. I looked at the patient, and said, “Are you experiencing what I am?” and the woman said yes I am, and strangely I said, you are a blessed woman. And she said, I know, and I have a lot of love in my heart right now!”

This experience, early on in my priesthood, radically changed how I understood our Lord’s words as recorded in Today’s gospel reading from St. Mark, “If anyone wishes to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow after me... he who wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.” When our God Parents at our Baptism promised for us, to love him and serve him, and when we affirm this as we become of age, and make a commitment to continue to be a part of the Church, the Ark of Salvation, we take on the whole life of Christ and suffering is part of it.

As Orthodox Christians though, we have a very different take on the Cross. Unlike other Christian denominations that focus more intently on the gore and horror of the Cross, we have a much more holistic understanding and emphasis. Yes we recognize the pain and suffering and Agony he endured, listen to the Gospel readings of Holy Thursday Evening and the Vespers hymns of Holy Friday. However, our iconography and hymnography portrays this in a more beautiful manner, focusing on his self emptying love. In the Icon of the King of Glory and Extreme humility, There is a serenity and a peace, that exudes from that icon, a brightness, that comes from the fire of love, the light of the Godhead, that shines from the person of the King of Glory, the Lord, Jesus.

Today on this third Sunday of Lent, the midpoint the Church, as a loving Mother, wishes to comfort us as we are struggling to keep the course of the fast, and endure our own personal crosses. Today, the Holy Cross is brought out to the center of the Church for us to venerate and draw strength from. It is decorated with Red Roses, the universal symbol of Love, to remind us about how our participation in the Mystery of Suffering will ultimately lead us to the Joy of the Resurrection and the Beauty of Paradise, where there is no sickness, pain or sorrowing. To bring this point home we sing the beautiful hymn, today Your Cross we Adore, Krestu Tvojemu!

Today, then, let us take a moment to pause and rest from the heat and weariness of the fast and the intensity of our personal struggles under the shady tree of the Cross. Let us not despair as we continue our Lenten Journey to Pascha, and our earthly pilgrimage to

Paradise. Remember, our Orthodox Faith, is all about putting on Christ, being like Christ, thinking like Him, acting like Him, and experiencing the joys and pains of life. The more we put on Christ in our life, the more glory we experience, and the more pain, and suffering at the same time. But this too shall pass, this suffering is something that we must endure as a consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve, but if we allow it, it can help us to attain spiritual healing. It can help us to be more humble and open to the presence of God, and as many godly parishioners here at St. John did, understand and experience the intense love He has for each and every one of us.

Yes, as I sat in that little coffee shop in New Haven on Friday, and tried to convey as best as possible, why it is that I love our Faith, I realized that what I value the most about our faith, is it is Christ centered and enlivened by His Love, for you and I and all of creation. May we truly be willing to put on Christ, each and every day of our lives, so that we can learn to Live, Love, Die and Be Resurrected to life in Paradise as He did!

Christ is in our Midst! He is and ever shall be!