

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Today the temple looks different. It is covered in red. And the Cross of the Lord adorned with red flowers and sweet basil is enthroned in the middle of the temple. We are celebrating the feast of the Cross of Christ which began last Wednesday and continues until this Wednesday. When we enter and leave the church in these days we bow profoundly before Jesus upon the Cross and kiss its wood with love.

We treat Christ's Cross in such a way because it is Jesus' "invincible trophy and weapon of peace." It is a trophy that cannot be defeated and it is a weapon not of war but of peace. The cross looked like neither at Jesus' crucifixion. To passersby the cross looked like defeat and death. There was no hint of resurrection on that day. No understanding even among Jesus' disciples that it was His death upon the cross that was the victory which would be fully revealed in the resurrection. The Messiah upon the cross is God in love with us, giving Himself up to death for our sake, for our salvation (*cf. Galatians 2:20*). His throne of glory is the cross. We proclaim Him as the King of Glory.

Jesus did not shy away even from the humiliation of the cross because of His love for us, His desire to save us from our sins, to save us from death. The message of the cross to us is uncomfortable because Jesus assures us that crosses will come our way. If the Lord of Glory was not delivered from his cross, how can we expect to be delivered from our crosses? Jesus makes clear to us that whoever desires to come after Him must deny herself, himself, take up her or his cross and follow Him. (Mark 8:34)

We will have crosses in our lives, whether we accept that or not. How will we respond to the cross of suffering, of death? Suffering and death will come our way, our own and of those we love and hold dear. Everyone, good and evil alike, will endure the cross. God does not deliver us from the cross. This is crucial for us to understand. Jesus prayed that the cross may pass but concluded His prayer to the Father with the words, "Thy will be done." The cross did not pass. Jesus was crucified for us. The rulers seeing Jesus on the cross ridiculed him, thinking that God provides only one type of help: deliverance from suffering. The rulers said, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him." (Matthew 27:43) And, because Jesus died upon the cross, the rulers would be justified in their judgment because the Father did not work a miracle to deliver Jesus from suffering.

So long as we expect from God only this type of help, to deliver us from suffering, only miracles that would eliminate all sufferings from our life, then the accusation of the Pharisees to Jesus upon the cross will be heard by others, even ourselves, "So wasn't your God able to help you?" (Fr. Alexander Schmemann) "Any cheap pill is certainly better able to relieve a headache than prayer and religion. And we will never understand the mystery of the Cross as long as we expect this type of pill from religion – be it for something trivial or important. As long as this is the case, regardless of all the gold or silver with which it is covered, the Cross remains what the apostle Paul said at the dawn of Christianity: 'a scandal for the Jews and folly for the Gentiles' (1 Corinthians 1:23). In our given situation the 'Jews' represent those who seek only help from religion, while the 'Gentiles' are those who seek clever and easy explanations. And in this case the Cross is truly a scandal and folly." (Fr. Alexander Schmemann)

The Cross of Christ is given us to look at, to venerate, to contemplate. We turn our attention from our own sufferings to the Messiah, Jesus, upon the cross for the love of us sinners. In seeing Christ upon the cross we understand that religion is not all about comfort or help, but about joy and victory. For we know that Christ's life did not end upon the cross but that through the cross He opened the resurrection from death to all of us, He opened to us salvation from sin and death. And as we live in a world where suffering and death are present, we also know that our hope is not only in the future, but is present with us now. For now we eat of the fruits of Christ's death and resurrection, His Body and Blood, God Himself coming to us, to be with us, to live in us, not to remove our crosses but to carry them with us leading us to the fullness of life in His presence of the kingdom which is yet to come.