

Beloved in Christ: Christ is among us!

Today is the middle Sunday of the Fast. Two Sundays have gone by and only two more Sundays remain before we celebrate Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead and the next day Jesus' entry in triumph to Jerusalem. On this Sunday we venerate the life-giving Cross of Christ. The Cross is given to us today and through the coming week as three things: first, as a reminder of where we are headed during Lent: to Jesus crucified for us and risen from the dead. Second, the cross is an oasis in our journey, the sign of victory from which we draw strength for the coming weeks. And, finally, the Cross is a call to us to give our lives over to God.

First, then, the Cross of our Savior is given us now, before Great and Holy Week, as a sign that this is where we are traveling. Our forty days of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are to immerse us in God's love. And nowhere is God's love more visible than in the Son of God, crucified upon the wood of the Cross for us. The Son of God, "wishing to restore all of humanity to life, accepted crucifixion." He accepted to be put to death as a criminal upon the wood of the Cross. All for the love of us, that we might be restored to life. At Vespers last night we heard it put so poetically, "Burning with boundless love for man, Thou didst take the quill of the Cross in Thy hand; dipping it in ink of royal crimson (His Blood), Thou didst sign our release with blood-stained fingers." (Doxasticon from the Stichera) The Son of God purchased our freedom from death by His own blood. If we are to appreciate, at least to some degree, what our salvation means, we must stand beneath the Cross of the Lord and contemplate the Son of God made flesh, shedding His blood for the love of us. This is where Lent is leading us.

Second, the cross is an oasis in our journey because at the same time that it is the place where Christ died for us, because of His death, it is the sign of victory for us that is fully revealed in the Resurrection of Christ. We sing to the Cross as speaking to another, "Through thee our tears of sorrow have been wiped away; We have been delivered from the snares of death And have passed over to unending joy." The Cross is the sign of our restoration to our original home: Paradise. The Tree of the Cross is God's answer to Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden tree in Paradise. Their eating of that tree brought death. We, partaking of the fruit of the tree of the Cross, the precious Body and Blood of Christ, we are restored once more to Eden. (Sticheron).

Third, the Cross of Christ is a call for us to give ourselves over to God. Jesus tells us this very day. "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 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." (Mark 8:34-35) Jesus is telling us that to preserve our life with Him we must continually, daily, turn more and more away from our sins and turn more and more to Him. We will fall into sin, even the same sin again and again, but the door to repentance is always open for us in this life so that we may turn away from sin which is a life of loss and instead turn to Life Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ. This requires of us denying our selfishness, our pride and judgment, our envy and greed, our gluttony and lust, taking up the cross of self-denial that we may be one with Christ Jesus. This is not only our task in Lent but throughout our lifetime. This comes only with first turning ourselves to God, to place ourselves in His presence, so that He may work in us, smoothing off our rough edges and polishing us into brilliant gems which reflect His holiness.

The Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ reminds us that our journey in Lent leads us to Christ crucified and risen from the dead. The Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the sign of victory

already won for us by the Lord and we rejoice in it. The Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ calls to us to turn from ourself to God, leading us from earth to heaven. The Lord Jesus Christ help us by His cross to complete these coming weeks of the Fast with joy.