

Beloved: Christ is among us!

At every Presanctified Liturgy, in the prayer for the catechumens, we pray, "O God, our God, the Creator and Maker of all things, who wills that all men should be saved and come unto the knowledge of truth..." This prayer, that God wills that all men should be saved, comes directly from St. Paul's first letter to St. Timothy where he writes of, "God our Savior, who wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3-4) This past Wednesday we heard this prayer in the hymns of the Presanctified also: "It is Thy will, O Master, that all men should be saved and come to knowledge of the truth." (Verse 7 sticheron)

Some translations say "God...desires all men to be saved" The word "desire" is weak. "I desire something." I blow out the candles on my birthday cake making a wish. Maybe it will come true, maybe it will not. That's not the word St. Paul uses nor is it the one that the hymn uses. It is "will" and not our will.. St. Paul and this hymn are not speaking about us humans. We are speaking about God. And God is not wishing upon a star that we are saved. "It is Thy will, O Master, that all men should be saved and come to knowledge of the truth." We tend to focus on "all men to be saved." We need to ask ourselves what does it mean that GOD wills our salvation? When we will something to happen, we must actually go and do it. We can say we will the car to be washed but that won't get the job done. We must either get out the bucket and sponge or drive to the car wash. *God's* will, unlike ours, is worked in wondrous ways. God speaks and light comes out of darkness, He breathes and life enters into us. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were established; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth." (Psalm 33:6) The firmness of the world is not in other created things or in powers innate to creation, but the firmness of the world is in God because He created it all.

God wills that all should be saved. And we are called to "imitate God. If He wills that all men should be saved, there is reason why (we) should pray for all, if He has willed that all should be saved, (we should) be willing also...pray for it... that it is pleasing to God, and thus (we) become like God, in that (we) will the same that He does...fear only to pray against anyone, for that God does not will... But if the Lord Himself wills to give (salvation to all), what need of (our) prayer? It is of great benefit both to (others) and to (us). It draws them to love, and it inclines (us) to humanity. It has the power of attracting others to the faith." (St. John Chrysostom on 1 Timothy 2:3-4)

"It is Thy will, O Master, that all men should be saved and come to knowledge of the truth." We add to these words in our hymn, "As Creator, save them all, and with them all, save me." (Verse 7 Sticheron) As Creator, save them all and with them all save me. It is as Creator that we ask God to save all. That's the ultimate meaning of the creation story in Genesis. It is not pure history but a spiritual text for the peace of our soul. God is Creator and remains so, the whole world is still in His care. The world cannot overcome God or escape God. And we pray that the Creator saves everybody else first, and only then saves us with every other person. And we should always place the salvation of everyone else above my own because, in this, we imitate God also, because He has always put us above Himself. Jesus tells us this in today's gospel, "For the Son of Man came to serve, not to be served, and to give His life as a ransom for many." God came selflessly to die for us, His creation.

The spiritual command, that we pray first for the salvation of everyone else, is found in the Old and New Testaments. When the Israelites fashioned a calf of gold, Moses pleaded for them before God. He said the people have sinned a great sin yet he asked the Lord to forgive

them “and if not, blot me out of thy book which thou hast written.” (Exodus 32:32) Moses was saying, “God, if You don’t forgive them, then keep Your heaven because I don’t want a part of it without them.” St. Paul says the same thing when speaking of the Israelites who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. He says, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race.” (Romans 9:3) Paul would rather be cut off from Christ than that his kinsmen, the Israelites, are not saved.

This same spiritual attitude of selflessness is in the life of St. Anthony of Egypt who was brought to a cobbler in Alexandria. God revealed to Anthony that this shoemaker was Anthony’s equal in the spiritual life. Anthony the Great who in the desert did battle with demons, persevered in strict fasting and prayer - this shoemaker in the midst of the bustling city was Anthony’s equal. He wanted to know how. The cobbler explained his daily prayer: “I see people pass by and pray to God, ‘That they may be saved and I alone condemned.’” The man was with God because he prayed first for the salvation of those around him. This is the way of salvation through selfless love which is God Himself.

Let us continue the rest of these days leading to the Pascha of the Lord not looking at the sins of others but praying for others that all may be saved, and we saved last, and that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven: that all should be saved and come to knowledge of the truth, His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.