

By accepting a suspicion against the neighbour, by saying, ‘What does it matter if I put in a word about my suspicion? What does it matter if I find out what my brother is saying or what a guest is doing?’ the mind begins to forget about its own sins and to talk idly about his neighbour, speaking evil against him, despising him, and from this he falls into the very thing he condemns. Because we become careless about our own faults and do not lament our own death, we lose the power to correct ourselves and we are always at work on our neighbour.

Saint Dorotheos of Gaza



**3 April 2016 is
the Sunday of the Holy Cross**

Matins Gospel: John 21:14-25

Epistle: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:1-6

Gospel: Mark 8:34-38; 9:1

Resurrectional Apolytikion:

Let the Heavens rejoice; let earthly things be glad; for the Lord hath wrought might with His arm, He hath trampled upon death by death. The first-born of the dead hath He become. From the belly of Hades hath He delivered us, and hath granted great mercy to the world.

Apolytikion for the Sunday of the Holy Cross:

Lord, save Your people and bless Your inheritance, granting our rulers to prevail over adversaries, and protecting Your commonwealth by Your Cross.

Seasonal Kontakion:

To you, Theotokos, invincible Defender, having been delivered from peril, I, your city, dedicate the victory festival as a thank offering. In your irresistible might, keep me safe from all trials, that I may call out to you: "Hail, unwedded bride!"

Readings and saints for this week:

Monday, 4 April: Isaiah 14:24-32; Genesis 8:21-9:7; Proverbs 11:19-12:6
4th Monday of Lent; George of Maleon; Plato the Studite

Tuesday, 5 April: Isaiah 25:1-9; Genesis 9:8-17; Proverbs 12:8-22
4th Tuesday of Lent; Claudios & Companions; Theodora the Righteous

Wednesday, 6 April: Isaiah 26:21-27:9; Genesis 9:18-10:1; Proverbs 12:23-13:9
4th Wednesday of Lent; Eutychius, Pat. of Constantinople; 120 Martyrs of Persia

Thursday, 7 April: Isaiah 28:14-22; Genesis 10:32-11:9; Proverbs 13:19-14:6
4th Thursday of Lent; Martyrs Calliopius and Akylina; Tikhon, Pat. of Moscow

Friday, 8 April: Isaiah 29:13-23; Genesis 12:1-7; Proverbs 14:15-26
4th Friday of Lent; Herodion, Agabus, Rufus, Asyncritus of the 70; Rufus the Obedient

Saturday, 9 April: Hebrews 6:9-12; Mark 7:31-37
Fourth Saturday of Lent; Martyr Eupychius; Vadim the Righteous of Persia



Evangelion

A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

3 April 2016

Take Up your Cross

Today, on the third Sunday of Great Lent, the Sunday of the veneration of the Holy Cross, we listen to Saint Mark’s Gospel and hear Jesus Christ’s challenging words about what it means to be His followers. He calls us to renounce ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him, and warns us that if we seek to save our lives we will surely lose them.

These are disturbing words and remind us of the great cost involved in being a Christian. Too often we can domesticate what it means to bear our cross, forgetting that, for Christ, the Cross was something that cost Him His life. And He reminds us in this Gospel that, if we are to be His followers, it will also cost us our life.

We might wonder at this. Is not our life a gift from God, and does He not desire that we should live it to the full? Why should He expect us to renounce life? Does God really want us to be miserable? Jesus gives us a clue to this paradox by telling us that “whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it.”

Jesus Christ came to bring us abundant life and to restore to life those who are in the tombs, as we will sing at Pascha. But in order for us to receive this gift of life we need to die to all of our tendencies to sin, to renounce our own selfishness and the many ways it has infiltrated our lives, and to open ourselves to genuinely following Christ. What this involves will be different for each one of us, but we know that there is no true life which does not involve dying to ourselves. And we know too that, in doing so, we receive the only life that is truly worth living.

Abba Joseph told Abba Isaac: "Once I was with Abba Poimen and saw him fall into ecstasy, Because I had great boldness with him I made a prostration and said to him "Tell me, where were you?" He was forced to admit, "My thoughts were there at the Cross of the Saviour, where Holy Mary the Mother of God was standing, and so I always wanted to cry like that."

From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers



The Prayer of Saint Ephrem the Syrian

One of the most striking prayers that we pray during Great Lent is the Prayer of St Ephrem the Syrian. It is prayed at the end of each of the Lenten services from Monday to Friday, accompanied by prostrations. But even when we cannot attend these services, we can still pray this prayer, which sums up the whole spirit of our Lenten repentance.



O Lord and Master of my life, do not give me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power and idle talk.

But give rather a spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Your servant.

Yes, Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother, for blessed are You unto the ages of ages. Amen.

This simple prayer sums up both the negative and the positive aspects of our repentance. It can help us as a sort of check list, for it warns us of the spiritual diseases that we need to be healed from, and reminds us of what it means to turn to God.

Sloth is a laziness and passivity that expresses itself in a “couldn’t be bothered” attitude, draining us of energy and preventing us from even trying to repent. It is a deeply rooted cynicism that is found at the root of all sin and poisons our spiritual energy. Sloth results in despair, or despondency, which the Fathers considered the greatest danger for the soul. Such despair cannot see anything good but is fundamentally pessimistic and prevents us from seeing and desiring God’s light. When we are possessed by the spirit of sloth and despair, we begin to lust for power. This might not always be obvious, but when we become self-centered, focusing always on our own needs and ideas, instead of being open to others, this is really an attempt to avoid the despair of our own inner emptiness, and to seek consolation by subordinating the needs of others to my own needs. These spiritual sicknesses are kept in place by idle talk. Speech is powerful and can be used constructively, but it can also be used to reinforce our own negativity, or to keep us from facing our real reality.

In contrast to these negative illnesses, which we can only cry out to God to remove from us, the prayer shows us the positive aims of repentance.

Chastity is not simply a sexual virtue, but refers to a wholeness and a whole-mindedness that is reflected in a chaste life. It is a state of being in which our bodies and souls are united and in which flesh and spirit cooperate and work together according to God’s purposes. The fruit of such wholeness is humility which means to accept the truth about ourselves and the situation we are in. The humble person is able to rely on God and therefore has patience, recognising that there is a depth to God’s plans and being able to hand oneself over to accept His will. All of these virtues lead to love, which is the crowning virtue, but which is also a gift from God for which we need to pray.

In the final petition, we are reminded of the great danger of pride. We have a tendency to compare ourselves to others and may even take pride in what we see as our own “humility” and “love”. However, the true mark that these are genuine is that we do not judge others.

The Sunday of the Holy Cross

Today, on the third Sunday of Great Lent, we commemorate and adore the Holy and Life-Giving Cross of Christ. In some ways this is similar to the feasts of the Exaltation and Procession of the Cross that we celebrate on 14 September and 1 August. However, this feast is not connected to any historical event, but is rather given to us to mark an important place on our Lenten pilgrimage. It tells us that we are in the middle of Great Lent.

Like the people of Israel we have been wandering in the desert, cast out of Paradise, aware of our alienation from God, but also of our desire to return to Him. If we have been fasting seriously, we are probably getting to the point where we are beginning to feel it, and we may even be asking ourselves whether it is all worth it.

The Church gives us this feast to encourage us on our pilgrimage to Pascha. It likens the Holy and Life-Giving Cross to the spring of Marah that the children of Israel encountered in the wilderness (Exodus 15:22-25). Its waters were bitter, but when the Prophet Moses placed a piece of wood in the water they became sweet prefiguring the Cross of Christ, which likewise sweetens our Lenten fast.

This day also marks a shift in focus, from our own repentance and Lenten efforts to the events of Holy Week and Pascha. We are called to turn our attention to Christ and His sacrifice and we also receive strength from the knowledge of His Resurrection that we are journeying towards.



Shine, Cross of the Lord, shine with the light of thy grace upon the hearts of those that honour thee. With love inspired by God, we embrace thee, O desire of all the world. 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. Show us the glory of thy beauty and grant to us thy servants the reward of our abstinence, for we entreat with faith thy rich protection and great mercy.

From Vespers for Sunday of the Adoration of the Holy Cross

In love did God bring the world into existence; in love is God going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of the one who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised.

Saint Isaac of Syria