

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JULY 10, 2022

ST. JOSEPH OF DAMASCUS

Today, July 10, is the day we Orthodox commemorate St. Joseph of Damascus--- the date of his falling asleep in Christ in 1860. I think he is the greatest Saint in modern times in our Patriarchate of Antioch—and so being his day pops up on a Sunday this year, I wish to tell you about him this morning.

In the 1800's, the Christian people of the Middle East had already suffered under Muslim oppression for 1200 years----a long, long time! And they had been part of the Ottoman Turk empire for several hundred years---that huge empire that spanned the Middle East, North Africa, and part of Europe and that didn't collapse until the end of World War I (they were on the losing side in that war).

Although it was never an easy life for Christians in the Middle East during all those centuries, it was also not a matter of constant violence against the Church and its people. But every so often, things would get very violent indeed!

That happened in the areas that are now in the modern countries of Lebanon and Syria in 1860. I do not know the details of how it all began but there was some kind of dispute in a village in Lebanon with a mixed Christian/Muslim population. The dispute got violent. And then the violence spread. It was not actually at the hands of the Turkish government but carried out by Muslim mobs---perhaps we could use the modern term “terrorists” for them. They murdered Christians: men, women, and children.

Soon the violence spread east into what is now Syria on the map. Thousands were slaughtered. And on July 10, 1860, this horrible killing hit the area of Damascus, the largest city in that part of the empire.

St. Joseph was one of several priests at one of the several Christian parishes in Damascus. As a child and young man he loved to study----and he loved God. He studied hard----the Bible, the Church Fathers, etc.----and came to have very deep faith. As a priest he was known for 2 main things----his great love for his flock and his preaching. The people of Damascus loved

his sermons so much they often called him “the second John Chrysostom”--- comparing him to the Saint from around 400 A.D. who is usually considered the greatest preacher ever.

Tensions had been mounting, but on July 10, all hell literally broke loose in Damascus as angry Muslims roamed through the city killing Christians. St. Joseph left his own home to go and visit his people, especially those who were too elderly or ill to flee the city to hide in the country.

He had with him what priests always have nearby---a reserved Holy Communion kit in which is contained the pre-sanctified Eucharist to give to shut-ins or others in emergency situations. How it works is like this----if I am traveling around doing pastoral things, I have my own Holy Communion kit with me. If I happen to get a text or call that someone is dying I drive right over and have the holy Sacrament with me----it sure speeds things up!

So Father Joseph that day snuck from home to home to visit those who could not run away. He told them they would very likely be killed that day. He consoled them and encouraged them to be strong and faithful. He heard their Confessions, anointed them, and gave them their last Communion. And then he snuck off to another home... and another.....

It appears that he gradually worked his way to the large church dedicated to the Theotokos. Probably he needed to “reload” his Communion kit from the sacrament always reserved on the altar. Many of the Damascus Christians were also gathering in that church to pray and with the hope that maybe they would be safer there---that even the mobs would have some respect for a holy place.

They were wrong. The mob surrounded the church and set it on fire. And if someone ran out from the burning church, the killers were waiting for them outside with their swords and knives and clubs. But some did survive this horror, among them St. Joseph. And once out of that situation, he continued right on visiting secretly from home to home.....

He was able to do this for some time that day without being caught by the mobs because many of the homes in Damascus had roof entrances---and many of them were close enough together that a person could travel across the rooftops without coming down to the ground. (If you saw the movie, “Mary Poppins”, do you remember the chimney sweeps’ dance scene? Something like that....) And so Father Joseph went secretly from home to home to prepare parishioners’ for their imminent deaths.

But sometimes he did have to go to the ground to get into some homes. And once when he did that a murderous mob was near by. They saw him and

approached him with great joy. They would now have a chance to murder not only a Christian but a priest! He was cornered as they approached with their swords and knives.

A quick choice had to be made----should he run for it? And probably be eventually caught and then quickly killed...and then the mob would happily desecrate the reserved Holy Eucharist he carried on him..... Or should he use the minute he had left before the killers reached him to quickly consume the holy things to preserve them from desecration, although that certainly meant he would not escape death?

He chose the second option and very quickly opened the container and immediately consumed the Holy Gifts just before the mob hacked him to death. And then they dragged his body through the streets of the city in celebration.

Thus ended the earthly life of Father Joseph and thus his heavenly life began that day.

A few brief things for us to learn from this story as we commemorate St. Joseph today.

One---This is the type of person we should have as a hero. Not sports stars, actors, musicians, politicians, and other celebrities. Someone like St. Joseph is truly great, not just well-known and influential. He is someone to admire and emulate and venerate. Someone to teach our little ones about.

Two—We should follow his example of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. He could have on that horrible July 10 have gotten rid of his priestly cassock and ran away to the country to hide somewhere and wait things out until the killing stopped. Instead, out of love for his fellow followers of Christ he stayed in the city to serve them and help them and comfort them. He quite literally gave his life for them.

Let us strive to follow his example in how we treat each other!

Third---Always remember the great reverence and love for the Holy Eucharist that St. Joseph had. He literally died in order to protect it from desecration. We should also always treat it with great reverence---after all, it is the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Joseph had such love for the sacrament that he died to partake one last time and thus protect it. We should have enough love for the sacrament to come here every liturgy to partake of it and to prepare properly for that taking.

Fourth—We have no doubt where St. Joseph is now! He is before the throne of God in heaven (or as Revelation 6 puts it, he lives under God's heavenly

altar!). And what does he do there in the presence of the Lord? He worships and he prays. He still has that same great love (greater, now, actually) for his brethren in Christ that he had back in 1860. And so he is praying for us. So, venerate him, love him, and ask him to say a prayer specifically for you. God will allow him to hear your request, and St. Joseph will pray for you.

Through the prayers of St. Joseph of Damascus, may God have mercy on us and help us!