

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
APRIL 7, 2024 VENERATION OF THE CROSS SUNDAY

MARK 8:34-9:1

“THE CROSS OF CHRIST”

This morning’s sermon will be unusually brief because we have 3 important ceremonies taking place at the end of the liturgy.

Today we are half-way through the season of Lent. At the end of the liturgy we will have the procession and ceremony of the Elevation of the Cross to remind us what this season is all about---remembering that Christ died for us on the cross and three days later rose from the dead.

In the ceremony today, we will carry through the church a cross decorated with beautiful flowers---but the cross on Great and Holy Friday was not a beautiful object at all. Crucifixion was a horrible thing. The goal of it was to give some one the most painful and slowest death possible. The great Roman writer and statesman wrote these words---“The cross is so terrible that it should not even be mentioned in polite company” (quoted in Birth of the Body, Ray Stedman, p. 178)

Historians say that it was even very hard on those soldiers assigned to crucifixion duty---who had to actually do the crucifying of condemned men. Alcoholism was rampant among them as they drank heavily during the killing just to get through it. (“Our Daily Bread”, 3/31/19)

The cross was truly a horrible, ugly thing. Our human race has made some bad inventions---the cross was one of the worst, one of the ugliest.

Yet today, we decorate it, we process with it, we sing about it, we kiss it, we bow to it in reverence for it. That is because by Christ voluntarily dying on it for us, He made the cross a beautiful thing----a sign of God’s love for us! When we see a cross it reminds that God is not our enemy, He is our friend.

During the Civil War, when a court-martial sentenced a soldier to death (for such things as desertion, refusing to obey orders, cowardice in battle, etc.) almost always appeals would be made-----and often those appeals went all the way up to President Abraham Lincoln. Along with the facts about the young man sentenced to death, there would always be testimonial letters about the soldier sentenced to death. These letters would beg Lincoln for mercy and would talk about extenuating circumstances or about how the soldier was really a good man,

etc. One day, one of Lincoln's aides showed him the paperwork for a young fellow sentenced to death. Lincoln looked over the court records and a letter from the soldier himself asking for mercy. But most unusual---there were not any letters in support of the young fellow. Lincoln, quite surprised, said to his aide---"What? No testimonial letters? Doesn't this poor boy have even one friend?" "Apparently not," said the aide. "Then I will be his friend!", said Lincoln. And he wrote a letter of pardon for the man. ("Pulpit Helps" May, 1978, p. 9)

Sometimes when all is going wrong in our lives, we may feel all alone. We may feel that no one can help us. But you do have a friend because Jesus Christ became your friend by His death on the cross for you. Today, as we celebrate His cross, give thanks to Him by venerating it. And all life long, thank Him for His death for you by living for Him.