

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2023

EPHESIANS 5: 8-19

“AWAKE, O SLEEPER”

The great Roman historian, J.B. Bury, tells the story of something that happened about 400 A.D. The Roman Empire was by then officially Christian and our Church was growing rapidly and its influence spreading. But not all old pagan ways had yet disappeared. For example, the gladiator fights were still going on and crowds still attended. They came to cheer for men slaughtering each other in duels to the death in the stadiums.

A devout Christian man named Telemachus couldn't bear that gladiator fights still went on. And so, one day, he went to a stadium. The blood-thirsty crowd was cheering wildly as two men fought with their swords and nets below them---fighting to the death. Telemachus walked out on to the stadium floor and separated the fighters from each other and told them to leave. Then he spoke to the stunned crowd, rebuking them for their evil pastime and urging them to repent and forsake the sport out of obedience to the laws of God. The crowd went wild, screaming at him for breaking up their entertainment. Then the crowd rushed the stadium floor and beat the brave Telemachus to death. But when their murder of him was over they all stood in silence---staring at his body, then staring at each other, as they realized the horrible thing they had done. And they began to think that Telemachus was right---that their new Christian Faith meant gladiator fights had to end. They walked out of the stadium in silence and the crowds for gladiator contests began to fall quickly. And before long, in 404 A.D., the evil sport was outlawed forever. (History of the Later Roman Empire, Vol. I, J.B. Bury, p. 164)

Today's sermon is particularly addressed to the young people among us---those in their teens, 20's, and 30's. (Of course, I hope the rest of you listen, too!) I wish to urge you to be like Telemachus 1600 years ago. We now have lots of younger people in our congregation, thank God! Some of you grew up here, some came into our parish recently, some recently entered the Orthodox Christian Faith by baptism or chrismation, some of you are right now catechumens going through your classes to come into the Church, and some of you that are here today are giving serious consideration to becoming a catechumen and eventually an Orthodox Christian. You are part of a wave of young folks coming into Orthodoxy around the country right now. It's happening in many, many Orthodox parishes—God is really doing something special right now! Thank God for so many new souls for His Kingdom!

And today a challenge to you young people-----make a total commitment to Jesus Christ like Telemachus did 1600 years ago. He changed the world and so can you with God's help and power. That is because the light of Christ is in you. In today's epistle reading from Ephesians 5,

St. Paul wrote in chapter 5, verse 8---“for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Light in the Lord---and that light of Christ in you can become brighter. In verse 14 of Ephesians 5, St. Paul apparently quotes a fragment of a poem or hymn---most translations indicate that by putting his words here in quotation marks. Some think that in verse 14, the apostle might be quoting the oldest of all Christian hymns. I like to think that and I like to think that maybe as St. Paul wrote down the words in verse 14 that he was singing them out loud! Here are the words---but I won’t sing it like I imagine Paul did!-----“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.” Young disciples of Jesus---remember Christ’s light is in you. And remember that it can get brighter. God wants to wake you from spiritual sleep by increasing His light in your life. To quote St. Paul once again---“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.”

This verse calls for decision, a big decision. And I am especially addressing you younger people about this because you still have most of your life *ahead* of you. Unlike us older folks who have most of our life behind us! Your decision will affect all the rest of your hopefully long life in this world—and, most definitely, your eternal life in the world to come.

It is up to you to decide about this light of Christ that St. Paul wrote about---do I want it to fill me fully? Do I wish to become spiritually more awake? Or just let my light flicker? Do I wish to be awake or spiritually snoozing? Some people prefer to sit on the fence. Don’t be like them! Instead, be like Telemachus. Don’t drift, don’t snooze. Be a bright light for Christ

We really need some bright lights because the world is getting darker right now. And there is so much pressure on us to just go along..... Lately, there are so many non-Christian trends, anti-Christian trends. A lot of pressure against what is holy. And perhaps it will develop that our Orthodox Faith will be pressured more than anyone else to give in to evil. But there is a good side to all this---less gray area to contend with! More of a clear division between darkness and light. That will cause us to need to clearly decide---to go with Christ and get brighter with His light.....or just slowly drift along with only a flickering light....

Your decision all focuses on what to do about one man---Jesus Christ. My challenge is to make your commitment to Him total. Being a follower of His should be your primary identity. Being an American? That’s nice—but it’s more important you identify as a disciple of Christ. Your political views are not nearly as important as your allegiance to Him. Neither is your national background, your cultural background, where you work, how you dress, what music you like, what you do for entertainment, etc.....All very secondary. What really matters is how committed you are to your Lord.

May your real identity be truly expressed like this---“I am a follower of Jesus Christ.” And that means allowing yourself to be more and more filled with light as St. Paul wrote about in Ephesians 5. Remember verse 14---“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead—and Christ shall

give you light.” And in the next verse, verse 15, Paul wrote---“make the most of your time, because the days are evil.” The days back then were getting more evil---and they are now doing so again. So make the most of the time. Don’t drift. Be wide awake, full of the light of Christ.

We older folks---well, we won’t be around that much longer. Everything will soon fall on your younger shoulders. Right now, God is calling so many of our your age group into His Church. Because, obviously, the dark is getting darker. Right now, Christ is bringing in many young people to spread His light in the midst of growing darkness. Who really knows? Perhaps great spiritual conflict is coming our way---the darkness is getting darker right when so many young people are coming to Christ’s Light.

So each person (whatever age!) needs to make a clear decision as to which side to be on---darkness or light. To just blend into the fallen (and falling world) around us or to shine brightly with God’s light---it’s one or the other.

Back in 1925, the Bolsheviks had been in control of Russia for a few years. Their Communist Party had grown very large. But the leaders were concerned about whether or not many of the members were truly dedicated to the Marxist-Leninist cause. And so party leaders did a lot of visiting of the homes of the Bolshevik rank and file that year to get an idea of how dedicated the newer party members really were. They were often quite disappointed by what they found. In many Communist homes, the people would have on the wall a picture of Vladimir Lenin, the recently deceased founder of Soviet Russia. That was very nice. But all too often, hanging on the wall next to Lenin’s picture would be an icon of Jesus Christ. Lots of Communist Party members had not really made up their mind! (Orlando Figes, The Whisperers, Metropolitan Books, 2007, p. 47)

We all, every day, need to really make up our minds-----the light of Christ or darkness? It’s one way or the other.....

As darkness seems to be deepening, the light of Christ in our country is getting brighter. More and more people, especially young people, are turning to Christ and His ancient Church. Let us each, no matter our age, do our part by, in our own lives, shining more brightly with Christ’s light, by truly being awake. Remember St. Paul’s words in today’s epistle, live by these words---“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead----and Christ shall give you light.”