

## HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SEPTEMBER 19, 2021

GALATIANS 2:16-20

MARK 8:34-9:1

### “TAKING UP A CROSS”

Back in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before Mao and the Communists took over China, there were Christian missionaries at work in many parts of the country. A young Chinese fellow with the common name of Lo came to faith in Christ. And he also began studying English and learned it quite quickly. A missionary gave him a gift---an English Bible, the common King James Version. Now he could learn more about his new faith while at the same time improving his English. He asked the missionary where to start in reading the Bible. He was told to start at the beginning of the New Testament with the Gospel of St. Matthew. And so he dug in.

After a couple of days or reading, Lo came to the end of Matthew and, boy, was he in for a surprise! For the first time ever he read the ending of the gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 19-20. Here is how it reads in the King James translation, the words of Jesus just before He ascends back to heaven--- --“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And, lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” Lo just about fell over with shock, and happiness, when he read that last sentence: “lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

He grabbed his Bible and went running down the road to find the missionary. He yelled to him, “Reverend, the Bible is truly amazing! Jesus talks to me by name in it!” The missionary was astounded by what Lo said and asked him to explain. Lo said, “Just listen!” And he read to the missionary the last words of the gospel----“lo, I am with you always....” And happily said, “That’s me, Lo, that Jesus is talking to! I’m so excited!” Well, the missionary had to calm him down a bit and explain the old English use of the little word, lo, and that it wasn’t really about him! I hope Lo wasn’t too disappointed! (“Our Daily Bread”, 11/15/92)

Technically speaking, Lo was mistaken. That verse really was not about him! But, accidentally, he had swerved into a real and important truth---God

*did* care about him personally and did know Lo by name! Jesus really could have truthfully said, “Lo, I am always with you!”. And we could insert our name in that verse and it would be just as true----“Bob, I am with you always!”; “Jane, I am with you always!”.

Because Christ really does know each of us by name and care about each one of us as individuals.

Last Sunday’s gospel lesson contained one of the best known verses in the Bible---John 3:16---where we read, “For God so loved the world.....” What a wonderful truth-----that God loves the whole world, the entire human race!

In this Sunday’s epistle lesson from Galatians 2, St. Paul brings that love of God for the whole world a little closer to home for us. He wrote in Galatians 2:20---“I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Yes, God indeed does love the whole world---a wonderful thing. But He doesn’t just love the whole world. He also loves each of us as an individual! God loves good old Lo, He loves you, and He loves me----each of us by name as individuals.

A; St. Paul wrote---“He gave Himself for *me*.”

Today is the Sunday after the holy day of the Elevation of the Cross. The scriptures and hymns are still focused on Christ’s death on the cross. On that cross, He died for the whole world. And even better, He died for you and for me. What if you were the only sinner that ever lived? The whole human race stayed perfectly holy----except you! If you were the only person who needed to be saved and forgiven, Jesus would have died on the cross *just for you!* That is how much He loves you.

And that leads to the big question for today. How should we respond to this great fact that Christ died for us? By living for Him. St. Paul says so in Galatians 2:20---“I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

But living by faith in the Son of God is not easy! It means to die to ourselves. Jesus said it clearly in today’s gospel reading, in Mark 8:34---“If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” Taking up a cross---that means dying to ourselves, it means being crucified with Jesus. As Paul said in verse 20 in our epistle reading---“*I* have been crucified with Christ.”

So the question for each of us is----Have I been crucified with Christ?

Have I have shared in His death so I can share in His life? Well, if you have been baptized, the answer to those 2 questions is definitely “yes”. Whether it happened when you were a baby or an adult, when you went under the water, you died with Christ, you were buried with Christ. And when you came back up out of the water, you were resurrected to share new life in union with Christ. You can read all about in Romans 6, the epistle reading at all Orthodox baptisms.

But....what about since you were baptized? For some of us, it has been a real long time! Have you continued dying to yourself and living for Christ? If your answer is “not really”....well, do you *want* to die to yourself and live for Christ? That’s all up to you!

There are lots of people who prefer to be “a little religious”. Instead of really dying to self and living for the Lord, they want to be “just religious enough to get by”. Perhaps be a church member but only attend every once in a while. Pray? Well, occasionally---especially if in trouble or really needing something. “A little religious”, but not too much!

There was a new priest assigned to a church. After he had been at his new parish a couple of months, one day on the way to his office he decided to stop at a little restaurant for breakfast----one of those places where you sit at the counter next to other folks. A man came in and sat down right next to the priest, saying, “Hi, Father! I’m a rather religious fellow myself and enjoy talking with clergy, so okay if I join you? I don’t recognize you---are you new in town?” The priest replied, “Yes, I just got assigned to a parish here about two months ago. I’m the new pastor at St. Mary Orthodox over on E. 97<sup>th</sup> St.” The man said, “Really! Wow, that means you are my priest! I’m a member at St. Mary’s! What a coincidence.” The priest said, “Are you sure you don’t have some churches mixed up? Maybe there’s more than one St. Mary Church around here. The reason I wonder is that I’ve been there now for 2 months already but I’ve never seen you in church.” At this, the man got a little huffy and said, “Well, Father---I said I’m rather religious. I didn’t say I’m some kind of religious fanatic who always attends every 2 months!”  
(The Message of the Sunday Gospel Readings, Vol. II, Father Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life Press, p. 43)

Will being rather religious be enough? No, it won’t be enough. Will being “a little bit Christian” be enough to get by? No, you won’t get by. God really isn’t interested in our being “a little religious”. He wants us to take up our own cross. He wants us to die to ourselves and live *totally* for Him.

He wants us to make up our mind-----do we really want to be with Him or

not?

So we each need to decide, each of us as individuals. Am I going to carry my cross for Christ? Or not? Am I going to live my life for Christ? Or really more for myself? God gives us the freedom to decide.

Perhaps the greatest danger is if we delay our decision. Because while we're putting off getting serious, time might run out.

So don't figure---well, Lent will come around in about 5 months. The perfect time to get serious about Christ! If you last that long! Don't put it off until next month and don't even put it off until tomorrow. After all, we never know how much time we have.....

Why not make the decision here and now? Perfect place----in church. Perfect time---in the Divine Liturgy. You can decide here and now----this morning. You can decide to no longer be a "somewhat religious person". This is the day to pick up your own cross and begin living totally for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sure, making such a decision means there will be plenty of "details" to figure out later. I would love to take some time to talk with you about that if you would like---figuring things out. Maybe a cup of coffee.....and, of course, Confession is good!

But the first step is *not* figuring out all the details. The first step is to make the right decision. And delaying can be very disastrous!

Jesus Christ, on Great and Holy Friday thousands of years ago, took up His cross to save us. Each of us as individuals. As St. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20---Christ "loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*." That day our Lord took a long and hard walk to Calvary, carrying His heavy cross for you and me.

Now it's our turn to pick up our crosses and carry them for Him. And it's our decision whether or not to do that.

It's time to decide. What do you prefer? To be somewhat religious or to live all out for God, carrying your cross for Christ? It will be a long, hard walk for you, too. And that long, hard walk will bring you life: both life with Christ here and now; and even better life forever in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Don't delay---pick up your cross today. Take it up for that man, Jesus Christ, who carried His cross for you.