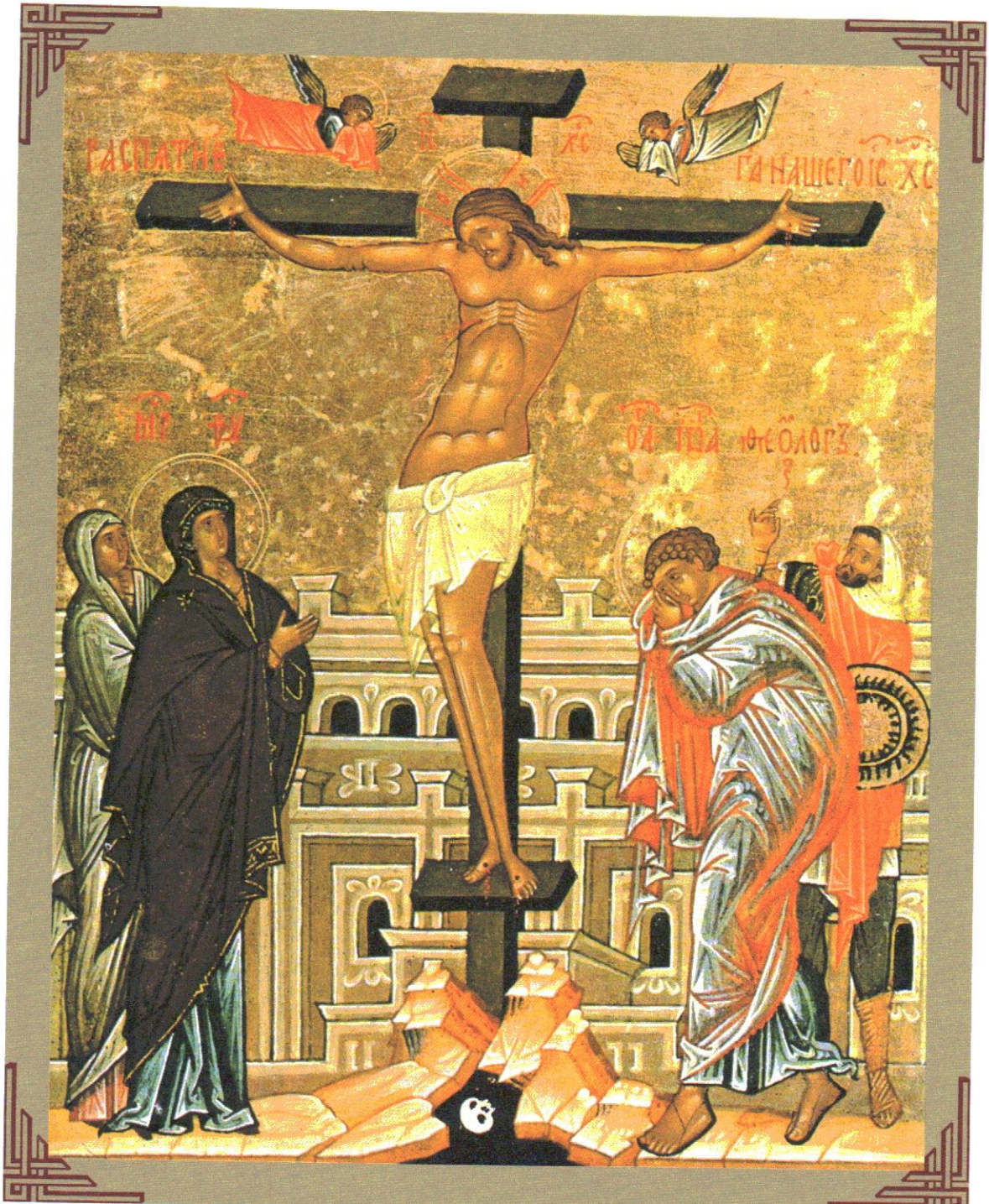
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Saint Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

24 BURKE ROAD **FREEHOLD, NJ 07728**

Third Sunday of the Great Fast **March 23, 2014**

Father Robert E Lucas, Pastor; **Rectory 215-862-9227; Parish Center 732-780-3158**
Subdeacon Daniel J. Korba and Nikitas Tsokris,
Cantors

We Are A Stewardship Parish Of Time, Talent and Treasure

The mission of our parish faith community is to teach the Gospel message in the rich tradition of the Orthodox Church; to enable people to reflect the image of Jesus Christ in every day activities of life; to offer spiritual formation through changing times; and to celebrate community among Orthodox believers in our Freehold area.
We of St. Paul the Apostle Parish dedicate ourselves to maintaining the sanctity of worship and spiritual enlightenment in a family environment that reaches and involves all ages and unifies all people.
We believe in the spirit of ecumenism in which we share our faith by word and example and extend our spiritual insights to all people.
We accept the responsibility of Christian Stewardship that through generous giving we may all experience a faith communion with Christ as the Center of our lives.
We dedicate ourselves to insuring the well-being of all people so that we may truly experience the message of Christ's salutary gospel.
We are a beacon on a hill with the eyes of many upon us; that beacon is the inspired Light of Christ which must shine brightly in our lives.

It is not ourselves we preach but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way possible, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in us 2 Corinthians 4: 5 – 8.

GLAD TIDINGS

+++ **This week only, we will celebrate at 7: 30 PM, Wednesday evening the Presanctified Divine Liturgy. We invite all our faithful to be present with us in glorifying our God during this holy time. Confessions before and after services.**

+++ **Saturday at 9:00 AM we will have the third All Soul Saturday. Please come and join us in prayer and praise. Confessions before and after services.**

+++ **Every Monday, we have prayerful devotions before the Myrrh bearing icon at 6:00 PM. Everyone is invited to be present in praise. The Birthgiver invites us to manifest our faith in response to her first shown love, to unite our prayers with hers for the salvation of our souls. Invite your friends and neighbors to join us.**

+++ **This Tuesday is the feast of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In anticipation, the vesperal Divine Liturgy will be celebrated Monday evening at 7:30 PM. Please join us in celebration and praise. Confessions before and after the celebration.**

+++ **On Saturday at 3:00 PM on April 5, we will have a guest Father Confessor to hear the confessions of our faithful. After the Penitential Service, Father John Fencik of St. Mary Parish in Bayonne will be with us. Please plan on taking advantage of this opportunity for spiritual growth.**

+++ **The Special Offering for flowers, palms, pussy willows for the coming feast days beginning with Palm Sunday will be taken on Sunday, April 6. Please be generous so that our church is beautified to manifest the beauty of our souls as for the celebration of the triumphant Resurrection.**

+++ **Please keep the intentions of these members of our parish intercession community in your daily prayers: Anna, Barbara, Betty, James, Yevlogia, Maria and Father George.**

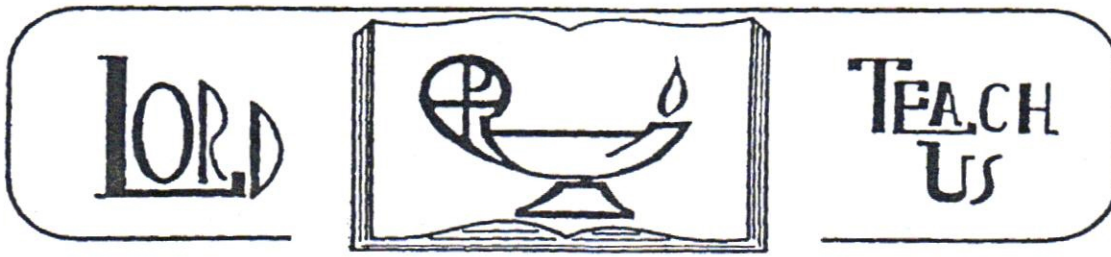
+++ **The sign-up sheet for both the Web Site and Bulletin sponsors is on the bulletin board in the kitchen. Please sign up as soon as possible. Do NOT make payment until your sign-up month has arrived. This will make it easier for Father to keep track of payments. Thanks in advance to all who support the parish in this way.**

+++ **We offer thanks to the Blessed Trinity for inspiring generosity in the souls of our faithful and the blessing of abundant grace in our midst with the offering received last Sunday: Tithe Offering, $443.00; Candles, $17.00; Great Fast Self-Denial, $60.00; Diocesan Dues, $130.00; Energy, $65.00; Holyday, $60.00; Kitchen, $2220.00; Food Coupons, $100.00, for a total of $3095.00. We express our profound gratitude to the parishioner communicants who offer their God-given treasure and labored for the sake of the Lord and the good of our parish. God bless and reward you good and faithful souls! The attendance was 44 adults and 13 children last Sunday.**

+++ **As faithful believers, we intercede and associate ourselves in prayer with the following who have prayed and offered seven day lights for their intentions: Father Lucas, Anna Zacharyczuk, Eleanor Korba, Robert Gorbich, Marilyn Korba and Pani Buletza.**

+++ We make a **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN** Canister available for our faithful to bring in pennies for our altar and its appointments. We are already in receipt of **$1715.00** from this apostolate. Even your pennies can help and are a blessing to our parish.

+++ Please be certain to see a member of the Parish Council if you would like to help our parish by using **Shop Rite Food Coupons** available in $20.00 denominations. We invite **ALL** to be caring and supportive and use Grocery Coupons for food shopping as we have gratefully realized $5700 on this project to date!



Rock Of Faith

The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, there is no deceit in him **Psalms 92: 15.**

Lord, how I love you! For you have done such tremendous things for me. The Lord is my fort where I can enter and be safe; no one can follow me in and slay me. He is a rugged mountain where I hide; he is my Saviour, a rock where none can reach me and a tower of safety. He is my shield **Psalms 18: 1, 2.**

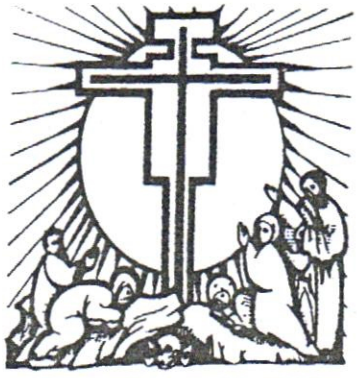
A voice said, "Shout" I asked, "What should I shout?" "Shout that people are like the grass that dies away. Their beauty fades as quickly as the beauty of flowers in a field. The grass withers and the flowers fade beneath the breath of the Lord. And so it is with people. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of the Lord endures forever" **Isaiah 40: 6 – 8.**

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer **2 Samuel 22: 2.**

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to give you a place in his glory, free from all evil, with great joy, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, let us give glory and honor and authority and power before all time and now and forever So be it **Jude 24: 25.**

You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation **Psalms 89: 26.**

What man is there who is not in fear before you, O Lord, and gives glory to your name because you are holy; for all the nations will come and worship you; for your righteousness has been made clear **Revelation 15: 4.**



The Veneration of the Cross

Immediately after the singing of the Great Doxology of Matins, the Cross of Christ is brought in solemn procession to the center of the parish church where it is enthroned on the sacramental table amid great respect and veneration. There it remains for the entire middle week of the Great Fast for the veneration and contemplation of the faithful.

The Cross was the instrument of capital punishment in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus. Criminals were executed by being tied or nailed to the Cross. According to the Law of the Old Testament, anyone who was crucified was considered a sinner cursed by God: "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree" Deuteronomy 21: 23.

"Father Forgive them..."

The unimaginable tragedy of this world is that when Christ the Divine Son of God and Lord of Glory, "through whom the world was made," came unto "his own," He was rejected and crucified. Christ was killed because men "love darkness more than light," because they prefer their own way to the wisdom of God, because they cannot bear the truth and love of God revealed in His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ was crucified because He is divinely perfect; perfect as God and perfect as man. He never ceased to confront men with the truth, being truth Himself. He did it because of His love and His mercy, never ceasing to forgive those who sinned against Him and His Father as well as His human brothers. Thus even in the midst of the greatest evil ever committed on the face of the earth, the Divine Victim cries out, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do" Luke 23: 34.

Center of Existence

The very center of the Christian faith and indeed of the whole of human life is the Cross of Christ. The Cross contains and reveals to us the very essential meaning of our lives. It shows us the Truth and the Love and the love of God Himself. When the world lay in evil, sold under sin to death, the Son of God became man. And not only man, but the slave of man. And not only a slave, but accepted death. And not only death, but death on the Cross (see Philippians 2: 5 – 8).

Christ could not have done more for us; He could not have gone further for us, for there was no where else to go, damned as we were by our own desire. He became sin for us though He knew no sin. He became a curse for us, though He is the Blessed of God. He died for us so that He could also be our Resurrection and our Life.

Modern Hair-Shirt Wearer Gets NO Aid From Penance

The Great Fast is penitential season, a time when man once again puts on a hair shirt, sacrificing any hope of bodily ease for its duration.

The hair-shirt was a garment of rough cloth made of goat's hair or other prickly material and used as a penitential robe from early Christian times. This was understood to be similar in purpose to the sackcloth of which Jesus spoke as penitential garb, its appropriateness to that purpose stemming from is irritating effect when worn next to the skin, "...they would have reformed in sackcloth and ashes long ago" Matthew 11: 21. It was adopted for clothing and bedding by public penitents and ascetics as a penitential practice. Its use by monastics began in the Christian East, as attested to by St. Jerome and then spread to the west where in time it became the distinctive livery of the monk. It was denounced later in time as a public parade of virtue, but many famous western saints are reputed to have worn it under their silks in daily life. In contemporary use it is sometimes used in the form of a strip of haircloth worn about the waist as a belt to remind man of his proclivity to sin and as a warning of the eternal punishment which results.

When sinners wore hair shirts under their clothing, it is said the people had benefit of the clothing and the saint had benefit of the penance. It was common practice for a time for believers to place upon themselves a hair shirt during this holy season as a penitential act.

Those whose lives are a constant search for sensual pleasure find it hard to understand why anyone should ever have worn a hair-shirt. But in the time of near universal faith, everybody knew that the hair-shirt, like fasting, was a form of penance; it was to be what St. Paul referred to as "...a thorn in the flesh," 2 Corinthians 12: 7, a sacrifice of comfort in order to tame a man's errant desires and rampaging instincts for self-indulgence. Although it is probably impossible to buy a hair-shirt today, it does not follow that contemporary man has less need for asceticism, nor that he does not need penances as severe as those of medieval man.

As many people wear hair-shirts now as ever before in history, but they are not called by that name and they are not always assumed in the sacrificial spirit appropriate to the Great Fast. The modern hair shirt is the sum of trials, annoyances and criticisms which surround one in the tense and nervous world of today. A hair-shirt may take the form of rising very early to get to work on time; of taking directives from an annoying and incompetent superior, of ending a seemingly endless series of foolish questions at the Information Desk, of having to encounter an irritating and gum-chewing assistant or the colleague who is always disrespectful and

insensitive with the kind of language or questions he proposes, or commonest of all, the hard grind of working almost incessantly to make both ends meet.

Any of these trials is an occasion for penance, if one chooses to accept it and offer the sacrifice to our God. A hair-shirt of this sort is not one we put on our selves, it is our neighbor who puts it on us. And we know he usually dresses us up in it to stay.

The old hair-shirt could be taken off, if the suffering became too great, even unbearable; the new one sticks to us like plaster. The old hair-shirt was made to measure, but the new takes our measure. The old ascetic risked losing all the benefit of his hair shirt if he became proud of the fact that he wore it. The new hair shirt is always humbling; no one can be proud of the fact that he knows a bore and must associate in business of life with him; or that his car got stuck in an hour of traffic. The older penitents were expected to take off their hair shirts on Holy and Great Saturday, but the new hair shirt outlasts the duration of every Great Fast.

The tragedy is that most modern wearers of the hair-shirt get no spiritual benefit from of it. Their trials and frustrations irritate and annoy them, making them complain, curse and swear, making them only more rebellious and more difficult. Because they do not use their trials properly, they have the pain, but miss the merit and blessing of each occasion faced in life.

Pain and sacrifice are vastly different things, but the difference lies in the will of each person and not in the degree of suffering endured. Pain is sacrifice without the love of God. Sacrifice is pain combined with love of God and offered up to him. There is an enormous difference between the woman who diets and the woman who fasts although they both lose poundage. But one does it for the sake of her body and the other for the sake of her soul with our Creator as the inspiration and final purpose. There is no material difference in the hair shirts they wear, but the real and profound formal difference is very great indeed.

To gain blessings from our inescapable hair-shirts, two basic beliefs are needed. One must first acknowledge the fact that man is a composite of body and soul, and that real effort will be required to keep the body as servant to the soul. The second essential is a belief in redemption which shows us how, by penance, we may come to repentance for our sins and past failings, and even for the faults of others as well.

THE FIRST BOOK OF THE MACCABEES

Author—The author is an unidentified Alexandrian Jew who wrote the book in Greek.

Date—Early first century BC is a likely date, considering the book's literary affinities and textual similarities with 2 Maccabees.

Major Theme—As with the previous Maccabean works, the predominant message is that *God remains faithful to His chosen people*, blessing and preserving them in tribulation. The book was written to console, exhort, and teach the Egyptian Jews in the midst of their tribulations, and to inspire faith in the providence of God (4:21) by recounting how the Jews had been delivered from similar trials in the past.

Background—The title of the work is a misnomer, for the contents do not deal with the exploits of the Maccabean heroes. Instead, the book recounts the struggles of Egyptian Jews who suffered under Ptolemy IV Philopater (221–203 BC).

The book begins by describing the attempt of King Ptolemy to enter and desecrate the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. When the desecration is averted by divine intervention through the prayers of Simon the high priest (1:1—2:24), the king returns to Egypt determined to wreak vengeance on Israel for his humiliation in Jerusalem. The remainder of the work describes the persecution of the Jews, the miracles wrought on their behalf, and their subsequent deliverance by God.

Outline

I. The Battle of Raphia and Ptolemy's Attempt to Desecrate the Temple (1:1–29)
II. The Prayer of Simon the High Priest for God's Help Is Answered (2:1–24)
III. King Ptolemy's Cruel Treatment of the Jews (2:25—5:51)
IV. Eleazar's Prayer of Intercession; Two Angels Rescue the Jews (6:1–29)
V. Ptolemy Repents and Favors the Jews; They Celebrate (6:30—7:23)

Third Sunday of the Great Fast

...he who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of he gospel will save it
Mark 8: 35.

What devoted believers gain by faithfully responding to Christ's first shown love, far exceeds anything we could possibly conjure up as reward for fidelity to the Son of God. Today's veneration of the life-imparting, life-giving Cross points to his miracles over death.

Compared to his other signs and astounding miracles, Jesus raised relatively few people from the dead in his three year public ministry among us. Only three are described at any length; two young people along with Lazarus. This little group represents hundreds of people each day who have not lived full lives, yet die, yet leave us remaining in the world, which all too often, and unfortunately, so many think is a far better place to remain than to go to the Lord for eternity. It was not the purpose of our Lord to reverse the effects of the fall of Adam and Eve. People still die physically. Those three just mentioned eventually died again, permanently. But their temporary resurrection demonstrated that death is not at all final, just as Christ on the cross today for our particular attention teaches us Great and Holy Friday may have its success temporarily, for some three days to be specific, but Resurrection is permanent. Three instances recorded in Scripture Jesus shows us what death can be, death will be finally be defeated just as He overcame the death that we sentenced him to by our sinful neglect.

The death defying miracles also had other objectives. They provided startling lessons in how far Jesus is willing to go to glorify his eternal Father. For example, He risks deeply offending his dear friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus by disappointing them in order to give them an even greater gift of delight! He purposely avoids running to the death scene of his friend so that He can raise him from the death after he breathes his last! And through it all, our God receives glory! By faith, then our own death will give Jesus yet another opportunity to glorify God! Let us keep that possibility in mind as we reflect on instances of the power of Jesus over death.

In his Roman epistls, St. Paul reminds us of broad truth: *For I am reminded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord* Romans 8: 38, 39. So we see that whatever world death introduces us to, the best covering preparation for it is to labor for the highest good of the world in which we live. But the exchange which death brings what it may, he who has spent his life in trying to make this world better can never be unprepared for another life in eternity. If we genuinely live here in this life, find our dearest work here, let love for God and man be the animating principle of our being and then, we can let death come when it may and carry us where it will, we will not be unprepared for it. We see the Lord was prepared for what occurred on the cross, what it would take to conclude his earthly life. He submitted to the will of our heavenly Father. He entered the realm of death to overcome it, to conquer it and emerge victorious over it.

The rending of the veil which hides the secrets of the unseen world, the summons that calls us into regions unknown, but yet, not really unknown because the Lord has gone before us to prepare a place for us, need awaken in our breast no perturbing response or dismay for we cannot in God's all encompassing universe go where love and truth and self-devotion are things of nothing, or where a soul, filled with undying faith in their progress and identifying its own happiness with final triumph of goodness, shall find itself forsaken.

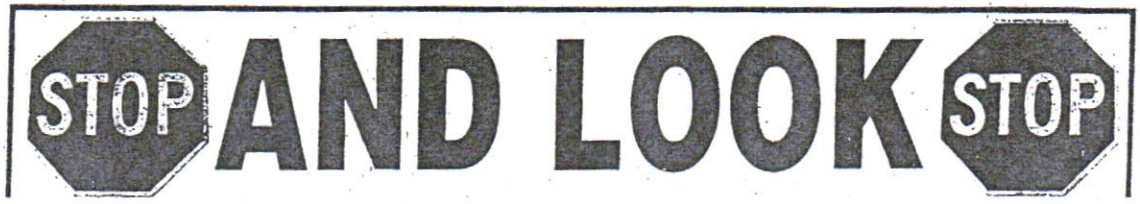
As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town **Luke 17: 12. The world has for him no chamber of terror or horror. He walks to the door of the sepulcher; the sealed cellar of his Father's house and calls for its four-day dead. He rebukes the mourners; He stays at the funeral; He gives back a departed child to the arms of devoted and loving parents. The roughest of its servants do not make him wince; none of them are so arrogant as to disobey his word; He falls asleep in the midst of a storm that threatens to swallow his boat. Hear now, on that same occasion, He rebukes his disciples! The children tremble at a gust of wind in the house! God's little ones afraid of the storm! Hear him tell the watery floor to be still. And hear him from the cross cry out in agony to heaven, *Forgive them for they do not know what they do*** **Luke 23: 34.**

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "do not cry!" Luke 7: 13. Do we recall the widow of Naim who had only one son and when he died she went out to bury him? Jesus meets the funeral procession and touches the bier where the dead was lying. This was absolutely incredible to the Jews who were there. Surely Jesus defiled himself by touching a dead body, but his touch resurrected, raised the young man and returned him to life. This was, after all, a widow's only son and she might now become destitute. Jesus simply says to her, " Do not cry!"

What does this short comment tell us about the heart of Jesus, our Saviour? He cares for women; He cares for mothers; He cares for this widow and He cares for her dead son. He touches the dead and they rise; because He is life; He is resurrection. That is how we recall and celebrate the veneration of the Cross today; it makes possible life for us; it imparts life and grace; it is a sign of God's redeeming and victorious triumph over the values of the world! So it is not so much a sad or agonizing event as one of enormous and deep truth, a literal plus sign for sinful man who take its blessed grace and utilizes it to achieve salvation in Christ's name.

Then he went up and touched the bier and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" Luke 7: 14. Compassion is another important lesson Jesus teaches us today from the cross and it is repeated in the story of the poor widow and her son. Christ is not afraid to break with tradition and had little regret for the status quo because as the Son of God He gives everything a new meaning and new, elevated understanding, even the cross, even the enemy of mankind, death itself. One of the greatest examples is found in the funeral procession as it is also found in a more magnanimous degree from the place of Pilate to the heights of Golgotha. The poor widow's husband and now her son were gone. But Jesus had such compassion for this grieving woman he just stopped and touched the dead young man. He has such compassion for all mankind, He concludes his own final procession atop the cross and touches us not physically, but spiritually in our souls. He tells in one instance the boy to rise while to us in the persons of Adam and Eve, He take us by the hand and raises them and us to their forgotten and lost and forsaken dignity.

Whatever the problem of a mother who has lost a child, suffered a miscarriage or suffers with infertility, or undergone an illness and do not have long to live. Today at the cross we see, whatever the problem, Jesus understands your grief. His arms are wide open to embrace you as they are spread upon the width of the cross to embrace the entire world in its sinfulness. He ascends the cross to touch us with his compassion, his mercy and his grace. May we all enjoy its benefits today.



Take notice that when you worship at the Divine Liturgy, you are in the actual presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.... You have left behind the limitations of the material world....You have entered the eternal kingdom of heaven....You participate in the heavenly banquet as an invited guest....You enrich yourself with heavenly enduring treasure....You keep company with Christ our Saviour and all the glorified saints. The angels surround you as you give witness to where your heart is.

Who wouldn't want this?

Who would forsake and avoid this?

Who would exchange this for something else?

Who would decline being in heaven on earth?

Stop, Look, Remember the words of blessed Peter:
"How good it is for us to be here" Luke 9: 33!

Lord, Jesus, I find it difficult

to pray at times.

I don't have the words.

I don't know what to pray for.

Sometimes my prayer sounds selfish.

I am going to trust that even when

I don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit

is taking my wordless sighs and unspoken

thoughts and shaping them into a perfect

prayer. He will present them to

the Father in your name. Your promises

continue to hold me together.

And I know your grace is sufficient for me.

Take Up The Cross

If we wish to be disciples of Christ, we must take up the cross and follow Him. This means first of all that we must suffer with Him in truth and in love. This means that we must experience the rejection of this world for the sake of the righteousness of God. That means that we must put into practice the very life that Christ Himself lived, the life that Christ Himself is, the life which is given to us in Christ's Spirit in the Church.

It is for this reason that the Cross of Christ is placed in the very center of our parish church in the middle of the Great Fast. It tells us of God's coming to us and of our return to Him both accomplished by Way of the Cross which is foolishness to the wise of this earth and very very scandalous to the powerful and worldly. Yet, for those who believe, it is the wisdom and the power of God Himself.

This is the teaching and explanation of St. Paul:

For Christ sent me to preach the gospel not with eloquent wisdom lest the Cross of Christ be emptied of is power. For the Word of God is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the foolish I will thwart."

For since, in the wisdom of God, it pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe.

For the Jews demand signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a scandal, to the pagans foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the Power of God and the Wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is more powerful than men 1 Corinthians 1.

This is what we venerate and contemplate in the midst of the Great Fast: the Wisdom and the Power of God, Christ Crucified for our sake.

We bow down to the Cross and rejoice in its message for it tells us the truth about life. It teaches us the truth and love of God for the world He created. And it tells us what we must do to be alive for eternal life in God's never-ending kingdom.

We bow to Your Cross O Lord and we praise Your holy Resurrection.

This is the veneration song of the life-giving Cross of Christ; the Cross on which we are saved. And the Cross which we must take upon ourselves freely if we will be saved, entering into the victorious Resurrection of Christ.

WISDOM! BE ATTENTIVE

Save Your people, O Lord, and bless Your inheritance; grant victory to Your Church over her enemies, and protect Your people with Your Cross Troparion, Third Sunday of the Great Fast.

No longer does the flaming sword guard the gates of Eden, for on them one finds the most glorious seal, the tree of the Cross. By it, the sorrow of death and the victory of the Abyss have been conquered, for You, O my Saviour, stood up and called out to those in the Abyss: "Enter again into paradise" Kontakion, Third Sunday of the Great Fast.

We bow to Your Cross, O Lord, and we praise Your holy Resurrection Hymn instead of "Holy God", Third Sunday of the Great Fast.

Rejoice, O live-giving Cross of the Lord, Paradise of the Church and new Tree of life, who bring us the joy of unending glory. Through you, the hosts of demons are driven back; in you, the angels in heaven rejoice; and for you, the assemblies of believers are now keeping the feast. O invincible weapon and impenetrable stronghold, pride of bishops and scepter of kings, grant that we may now contemplate the Passion of Christ, and His holy Resurrection Vesper Hymn, Third Sunday of the Great Fast.

Seeing You, the Creator of the universe, hanging naked on the Cross, all creation was shaken with fear; the sun hid its rays and the rocks split asunder; the earth trembled and the veil of the temple was torn in two; the dead arose from their tombs, and the powers on high were struck with awe and said: O, what wonder! Behold, the Judge undergoes judgment and freely endures His passion for the salvation and restoration of the world Vesper Hymn, Third Sunday of the Great Fast.

Come, let us all sing a new song to celebrate the defeat of hell; for coming from the tomb, Christ has broken the power of death and saved the world. Come, let us all draw in faith, not from the fountain of corruption, but from the source of light; let us venerate the Cross of Christ in Whom we are glorified. As we venerate the Cross, which Moses formerly prefigured with his hands, we put the spiritual Amalek to flight. O Christ, our Master, and we ourselves are saved. Matins Hymn, Third Sunday of the Great Fast.

Celebrating the Great Fast

Now, therefore, says the Lord, be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting, and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts...and turn to the Lord your God
Joel 2: 12, 13.

We are now in the celebration and living of the Great Fast. Note we say celebration of this most sacred season. And we say this because as believers we should be able to understand and see the compelling beauty and positive aspects of penance and *metanoia* which is the all-descriptive Greek word which expresses change, a turn-around of our activity in directing ourselves to God as our God. That is what we celebrate during these forty days. And when we truly do this, truly turn all around and direct ourselves to God as our God, we naturally celebrate the victory of regaining our once-lost treasure.

Our holy Mother Church desires we smash through the veneer of righteousness, the smug respectability, the coddling sentimentalism that we have of this season to see it for what it really is: a time of concentration on the goodness and eager forgiveness of our God, a time when we attempt seriously to approach the holiness, the sanctity of the Blessed Trinity in our daily living. To the man and woman, who like the rich man of the gospel story, is totally absorbed in self and in worldly existence, who wrongly thinks he is enjoying this physical life without a serious thought for the soul's great reality, the message of the Bride of Christ during this serious and sincere season drops like a thunderbolt from heaven, "You fool, this night I will require your soul" Luke 12: 10. It is precisely thinking and praying about circumstances such as this that the Birthgiver of God preoccupied herself in God's enriching grace to be visited by the messenger and good news-bearer from heaven to become the Mother of God in the flesh.

During this sacred time, the Church desires we recognize we have sinned in the very face of the God who created us, who shares with us all we have. As the days pass on and merge into each other, we learn our God is not mocked. Repentance is the continuing refrain of all these days which have as their goal removing from us the sickness and separation of rebellion and revolt. We are to remove all the guilt and effects of sin and return to our God. "For what a man sows, so shall he reap" Galatians 6: 7.

Just as Old Testament believers waited some forty centuries for the coming of the Messiah and the reality of salvation, so is the message of that holy time a stern reminder, "...the soul that sins shall die" Ezekiel 18: 20; "He shall be punished for all he did" Job 20: 18; "And which of you," asks Isaiah the Prophet, "can dwell with devouring fire? Which of you shall dwell with ever-lasting burning?" Isaiah 23: 14. Thus the eager believer desires greatly to avert the catastrophes foretold about those who do not recognize in these holydays a time for change, for transformation, for returning to holiness and sanctified dignity in which man is created.

The worldly soul immediately responds: "Why be so direct about these things? Why refer to matters which are disconcerting? Why talk about and stress subjects which are disturbing? Why not dwell instead on the happiness of heaven or the beauty of virtue in friendship with Christ? Why talk about repentance and a change in our lives? But when we who are serious and sincere about salvation of our souls come to realize the enormity of our sinfulness and how much we have fallen short of the glory of our God, we want to change first and then realize we have a right to expect the inheritance our Creator prepared for us. No one was more impartial, tactful and refined than our Saviour himself. No human being draws us nearer to Christ than the examole of the Mother of God who today is recognized for aligning her will, her life with that of God.

To the generality of people, Christ speaks, not to please their ears, but to pierce their hearts. And if what St. John echoes for us in his gospel, "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" 1 John 1: 8, it is precisely because of the depth of our sinfulness that we have be been gifted with this season of seasons. It is time to do something about our condition and return to the status we once held in the eyes of our Creator, destined to be like God. There is an urgency stressed by the Church because we are approaching the glorious feast of all feasts. God speaks directly to each of us individually just as He did in the Old Covenant: "Now therefore says the Lord, be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting and weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts, and turn to the Lord your God" Joel 2: 12, 13.

The Church repeats this simple message during this time, 'Unless you do penance, you shall likewise perish" Luke 13: 13. If we admit the folly, the ingratitude, the danger of sin, are we not defying our God by remaining in a state of obdurate sin by refusing to seek his freely offered forgiveness? He has made available the tribunal of penance and reconciliation. It is our sin that has brought death to our Saviour as realistically as it has condemned our own soul. Let us remember what the Saviour said to his contemporaries: "Woe to you, Corozin, woe to you Bethsaida, for if in Tyre and Sidon

had been worked such signs and miracles that were worked in you, they would have done penance in sack cloth and ashes" Matthew 11: 21.

So, for us, if the Great Fast is to mean anything at all, it must be a turning away from our sinful impulses. We cannot be converted to God if we remain in a state of sinfulness. If we truly desire change, we must seek the helpful and invigorating grace of our God. Sanctity cannot be achieved by ourselves, only through God's sharing of himself with us. Reconciliation, a return to God, a union with our Creator is the explicit reason for this sacred time. St. John Chrysostom explains our responsibility to ourselves to pursue holiness. He says, referring to a bodily wound, that it is not enough that the arrow has been extracted and removed from the body; the wound that inflicts must also be healed. So with regard to the soul, not enough that sin is pardoned, the remaining wound must be healed by our voluntary acceptance of penance and pursuing virtue.

King David, who sinned, repented and was forgiven by the Lord prayed, "Wash me yet more from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" So we must pray for and finally assume a penitential character during this holy season that we may be found worthy on the day of the Resurrection which we will celebrate in but a few short days.

The athlete, the lawyer, the physician, the politician, anyone at all who seeks a worthwhile goal is perfectly willing to make the sacrifices necessary in order to succeed and achieve. How, then, do we reasonably expect to achieve an everlasting, an eternal goal effortlessly, indifferently, easily, comfortably, with absolutely no self-sacrifice? Do we seriously believe we have a soul to save? Then more prayer, more penance, more repentance, more almsgiving is the necessary answer. St. Paul does not fail to remind us, "Do not despise the riches of his goodness and patient long-suffering. Do you not know that the goodness of God leads you to penance" Romans 2: 4?

The Great Fast for genuine believers is a time to increase our strength spiritually to combat our own weaknesses which lead to sin. It means that we thereby avert the justice of our God in judgment. It means we assure our everlasting happiness. We recognize amazing strength in heavenly grace is being provided. We literally scoop it up and apply its strength to our soul, to our heavenly cause so sin is removed through the sacramental Mystery of Reconciliation. There is no sincere observance of this sacred season unless we assume seriously the admonition of the Prophet Joel: "Now therefore says the Lord; be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts and turn to the Lord your God" Joel 2: 12, 13.

Inventory

Have you ever taken stock
Of things the Lord has done
By counting out your blessings
And name them one by one.
The things we take for granted
Would fill a lengthy list,
And maybe we'd stop complaining
About little things we've missed.
Just count your answered prayers,
And all the good times too.
Remember, too, the messengers
And friends God sent to you.
And don't forget the miracles -
I know you've had a few
When you climbed the highest mountains
The world had given you.
The Lord was there to cheer you on
When you had given up.
When your gas tank was on empty,
He came to fill it up.
So often we don't thank Him
For drink or daily bread,
And His Book there on the table
Too often goes unread.
Examine us with mercy, Lord,
When our hearts are too small
To comprehend Thy goodness, Lord...
And forgive us one and all!

Hearts Stolen From God

Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And he said to them, 'it is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it into a den of thieves'
Matthew 21: 12, 13.

The Lord fills his lungs and listens and observes for a few moments even though it is not the first time He sees what is occurring in the House of God. Then, with a voice that resonates high above the bleating of sheep and lowering, shouts of sellers, arguments of the cheated, He echoes texts from God's revelation to us in Scripture from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, *It is written 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.' But you have made it a den of thieves!''* The observing disciples are impressed beyond all else by the expression on his face; not of moral force only but preeminently and predominantly of love. The young John could feel the love which drove Jesus: love for the eternal Father and his temple, love for the cheated, love for the merchant sinners and herdsmen who were trapped into sacrilege by greed and custom; even love for the place of worship, for the temple authorities who betrayed their trust.

But of course, within the mind and heart of the Saviour is another concern, perhaps just as urgent and compelling, just as important and decisive. Shall those who are temples themselves of the living God suffer to be reduced to dens of thieves and cages of unclean birds? Shall vain unchaste thoughts be suffered to dwell within them? Much less shall anything that is impure be conceived or enacted by them? We all know with what distinguished ardor our blessed Redeemer purified an earthly temple; a temple of mortar, bricks, wood and stone; a zeal for the House of his Father eats him up; with what a holy vehemence dud He veritably overturn tables of the money changers and scourge the buyers looking for a bargain and sellers seeking to make an extra coin in profit! Why? Simply because they made his Father's house into a house of merchandise pandering; they turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves. They exchanged sanctity and holiness for worldliness and were satisfied they had done a good deed. How dismally dedicated are the priests, congregants and buyers and sellers are! How deluded is their thinking!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! How often have you and I been equally guilty of this great evil! How often has lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life, insensibly been stolen away our hearts from our Creator God? Once they were indeed houses of prayer, faith,

hope, love, peace, joy and all the other fruits of the Holy Spirit lodged within them by gracious charity of our Eternal Father, but now, it may be thieves and robbers we consort with, allowing them to take away the virtue of our loving to be replaced cheaply with the wordliness of our secular temporal life.

Today we must ask our heavenly Father, his divine Son and the all Holy and adorable Spirit to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of mighty power from heaven so that we may worthily extol the holy name of our God in worship every opportunity we receive and is given us by the generosity of our Church. This holy place, this sanctified parish church is the residence of heaven and the place of God enthrone among us. But in reality God's mansion in the heart of the Christian, the dwelling place of the uncreated God ought to be secure. Has the unduly throng departed so we labor in concert with our Maker that sinful attacks are dissuaded and leave the consecrated door to our soul. Are we who are devoted to the Lord still keeping company with the swarm that frequents this holy place but labor instead to steal away the joy of souls and help in robbing the Saviour of his praise? Do we try to do the will of God, but still keep up a designing trade in sin, satan and the world? Do we allow ourselves to even be pressed and persuaded to part with ease from virtue and purchase pain for our conscience while attending worship? Yes, we recognize all our shortcomings in which we gladly indulge while hearing an encouraging voice within to continue in sin. We too become weary of the bustling crown with whom we share separation from our God. So while there a voice is heard within, we cannot serve God as we should. How we hope for the joy his presence imparts, experiencing the unfathomable peace which reigns when we recognize He is here!

His presence makes even a den of thieves a calm delightful house of prayer! Because then we come to recognize the more our God makes his temple shine, the more self-abased shall we adore because gold and silver are not ours, but we can always give what God has given us before: an unabashed and reconstructed faith renewed in our baptism and empowered and enriched by our Chrismation.

Because of what happened in the temple, people could not ignore Jesus any longer or be indifferent to him. They had to take sides. Either Jesus was some subversive radical who must be restrained or He is someone to be listened seriously to, He must be believed and followed. Today indifference to Christ is commonplace, even by so many Orthodox believers, deacons, priests and bishops. When we listen to the real story, there is no middle ground. Either Jesus is God's Son, the world's Saviour, or He is a befuddled, perhaps demented imposter. Today listen and believe, look at the Cross which we venerate, listen, while there is time before Jesus comes to clean souls of false religious practice and instill spiritual life one last time.

THE CROSS OF OUR LORD

HOLY TRADITION tells us that the plaque nailed above our Saviour's Head at His Crucificxion bore the inscription: ***"The King of Glory."*** Our Lord does not look like a glorious King in our accompanying icon. His body hangs limp on the Cross, while His Mother stands stunned to one side, comforted by another women. On the other side stands the Apostle John, bewildered by the death of the Lord, and next to him the Centurion, marvelling at the sight and proclaiming for all to hear: ***"Truly this man was the Son of God."*** But it is precisely in His death that we see the glory of the Lord, for He so loved us that He gave His life, conquered death and rose to life from the grave.

While the icon depicts the scene of Crucifixion in some historical detail, it also serves to impart the essential significance of the event for mankind. Thus, we see the symmetrical walls of Jerusalem in the background and below the symbolic cave containing the skull of Adam. The Cross, it is said, was erected over the tomb of Adam, so that the blood of Christ cleansed all of mankind. ***"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive."***

Every Third Sunday of the Great Fast, the Church sets the Cross of Christ on the Table in our House of Worship, so that all may view and venerate the Wood of salvation. This puts into perspective our thoughts for the Fast, and spurs us on to spiritual warfare against all that is contrary to Christ.

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