

ST. THOMAS SUNDAY, MAY 1, 2022
John 20:19-31
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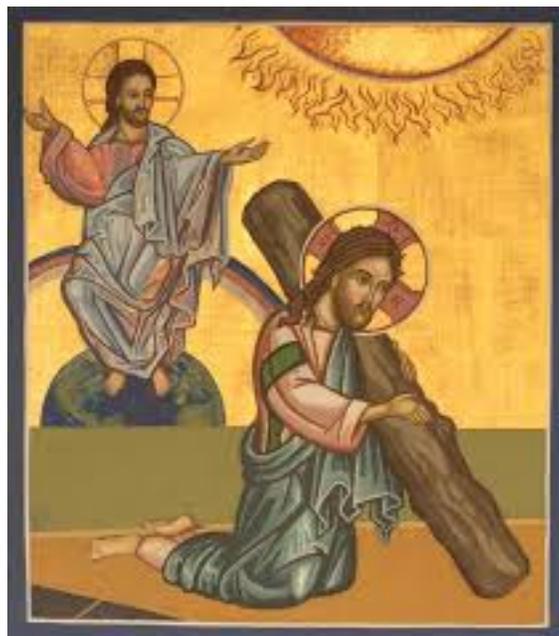
The pain and suffering of people seems to exist everywhere, and no one is exempt. St. Nektarios, the Metropolitan of Pentapolis, spent his entire life trying to alleviate the sufferings of others in whatever way he could ~ for example, seeking donations from kindhearted benefactors, giving away his salary to the poor and the needy, helping people to find employment, or sponsoring students so that they could study for the priesthood. Above all, he prayed and fasted constantly for those in need and for the whole world. St. Nektarios himself was not exempt from pain and suffering. He suffered his entire life from unjust slanders from clergy and men in high places who accused him, among other things, of immorality and lack of obedience to the Patriarch. There was never a canonical ecclesiastical trial, and there was no proof or witnesses to back up these false accusations. All of this was done out of jealousy and malice and fear that because of his popularity among the people, he might be appointed to a position in the church that they themselves were seeking. Just as Jesus was a threat to the Pharisees of old, St. Nektarios was a threat to these modern day Pharisees in the Church. The slanders reared their ugly head and followed him his entire life, no matter where he went, causing great hurt to his feelings, even unto desperate tears of sorrow. Yet the saint patiently and humbly endured, harboring no hatred or malice against his accusers. He understood very well the reason for their actions, so he prayed for their forgiveness.

Here is one example of the countless suffering Christians that St. Nektarios encountered in his lifetime: Once, an elderly grandmother came to him with great sorrow and desperation. She had lost three children to typhus and felt that she could not go on. She said that she wanted to poison herself. While grasping an icon of our Savior to her bosom, she cried, "Why, O Lord, have you done this to me?" How many of us who are suffering for one reason or another ask the same question: "Why?" Even St. Nektarios because of the slanders against him was driven to tearfully ask: "Why, O Lord? Why? What have I done to deserve this?" St. Nektarios embraced the grandmother with Christian affection and said to her, "Your pain is my pain." The saint continued, "There is no 'why' when we speak to God, for He knows all and His will cannot be questioned. We must simply live by faith and be comforted by the knowledge that your children have gone on to a better life." St. Nektarios understood very well that in this life, suffering walked hand in hand with the gift of free will which God has given us. When St. Nektarios was so grieved that he was tempted to despair, he would look at the icon of our Savior who had fallen on His knees while carrying His Cross to Golgotha, and then St. Nektarios would be calmed and comforted, because then he understood perfectly well and was reminded of the the answer to the question "Why?" The dreams of the saints and of the righteous are not for temporary earthly kingdoms, earthly wealth and possessions, earthly pleasures, and earthly titles and positions. Their dreams are of the eternal Kingdom of God. They understand that if they faithfully and patiently carry their crosses and endure to the end they will be saved.

Once when St. Nektarios was visiting the Holy Mountain Athos, he asked a holy hermit what he thought about the dawning of the new century. The hermit took a deep breath, looked up to Heaven, sighed, and said, "I see the end of kingdoms, wars, turmoil, massacres, destruction...Fear will reign." Many people today in the age of the internet are particularly consumed by social media and politics. They are spending an inordinate amount of time with this and are neglecting the one thing needful ~ prayer and study of the Sacred Scripture, the Lives of the Saints, and the writings of the Holy Fathers. St. Nektarios rarely read newspapers and rarely discussed politics, if at all. This does not mean that he did not care about the world and world events. Quite the opposite. He was very well aware of the sin and evil in the world and he prayed and fasted constantly for the peace of the world, that the world would turn away from Satan and instead turn to Christ.

The Son of God came into the world to forgive sins and to restore mankind to eternal life. The world responded by hating and slandering Him and by killing Him on a Cross. For forty days we are told that the Risen Lord appeared to His disciples. And where do we find the disciples? They are hiding behind a locked door for fear that the malice of the people will be turned on them because they are the disciples of Christ. They are literally afraid for their lives. The fact is, each of the twelve apostles, except for St. John the Theologian, will eventually suffer martyrdom and be killed on account of their faith in Christ. Today there is a superhighway of information constantly bombarding us, yet very few people know that the Christians are the most persecuted people in the world. Why do you suppose very few people know about this, and why do you suppose the Christians of today are being persecuted so much? Christ has been forgotten, and instead people today turn to science and various social and political theories for direction. The overwhelming majority of mankind's nations and leaders no longer look to the Gospel and our Savior for guidance. A world without Christ becomes a world of lies, stinginess, selfishness, greed, coldness, indifference towards others, lack of love, perversion, moral depravity, censorship, horrific crimes, lawlessness, anarchy and persecution of the truth. This is what happens when people turn away from Christ. Children in kindergarten today are taught that they can choose whether or not they want to be a boy or a girl, or they can choose to be neither. The endearing and precious word "mother" is considered offensive and outdated, and instead we are supposed to say "birthgiver." "He" and "she" are offensive pronouns and some academic institutions of higher learning are forcing students to use bizarre made up pronouns. I could go on and on, but I think that you are already painfully aware of what is going on in the world today. Truly the world has gone mad, and ironically the world says that it is us, the Christians, who are mad.

Like the first disciples to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection, and like all of God's righteous clergy and preachers and Christian laity, we will all face persecution and slander because of our faith in Christ. Some of us, because of our circumstances, will live in fear, like the apostles in the Gospel today whose lives were openly threatened. But the Lord tells His little flock to fear not, for He has conquered and overcome the world. These things must need come to pass. Eventually faith overcame the fear of the apostles and they unlocked their door and courageously went throughout the entire world, preaching and baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We too must not live in fear and intimidation, but boldly stand on the rock of Christ and our Holy Orthodox faith. Our Lord tells us that he who endures to the end, in faith, patience, prayer and devotion to Christ and His Holy Orthodox Church, will be saved. With God's help, so be it. Amen.



For further study:

1. See the book "Saint Nektarios: The Saint of our Century" by Sotos Chondropoulos, Athens, 2004. (translated into English by Peter and Aliko Los).
2. See the biographical film about St. Nektarios "Man of God," 2021, written and directed by Yelena Popovič, produced by Simeon Entertainment and View Master Films with the Holy Monastery of Vatopedi of the Holy Mountain Athos. In English.