

3RD SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT — VENERATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

Mark 8:34-9:1

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Today is the 3rd Sunday of Great Lent. We have reached the halfway mark of our journey to Holy Week and Pascha. The Church, in her wisdom, appoints that on this day the Holy Cross is to be brought out for veneration. Great Lent is a journey. Along this journey we are experiencing hunger and thirst as we increase our fasting. We are experiencing fatigue as we increase our prayers, both at home and in church. Therefore, the Cross is brought out in order to strengthen, uplift, inspire, and comfort us, so that we may not falter, and so that we may successfully finish our journey to the end.

In today's Gospel reading we heard about what our own cross means to us. In this Gospel reading which we heard, our Lord Jesus Christ says, "If anyone wishes to follow me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." The Lord then pronounces mysterious words which perplex many people: "For whoever wishes to save his soul, will lose it, but whoever loses his soul for my sake and the Gospel's, will save it." What kind of soul are we speaking about here? The word "soul" in this case is synonymous with the word "life." The one who wants to live his life for himself, will ruin it, and loses his chance for salvation. But the one who lives his life for others, the one who will sacrifice himself for the sake of others, just as our Lord Jesus Christ took up his Cross and went all the way to Golgotha and suffered death for the sake of mankind — such a person will save his soul, save his life, and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. What cross is our Lord Jesus Christ speaking about? The one that is different for each of us. He carried His Cross to the very end, and the Lord is calling on us to carry our earthly cross which is made up of those sorrows and trials which we are called upon to endure. Our cross consists of all those things which are difficult for us to bear, but with God's help become bearable. Even our Lord Jesus Christ needed the help of another person in order to carry His Cross to Golgotha. In a similar way, the Lord sends people to us who help us to carry our cross, to lighten our burdens, and who share with us our sufferings and our sorrows. The Lord does not leave us alone with our cross, but sends us the right people at the right moment — those who will strengthen us, who will comfort us, who will help us. And very often the Lord Himself helps us through people, because it is His will that we receive help from Him, not always directly, but sometimes through other people, through those whom He sends to us.

If a person lives only for himself — then really he is ruining his soul, because he is spending his life either in idleness, or in greed and acquisition, or in thoughtless entertainment, or in other activities that do not bring him closer to God or to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whereas the person who lives for others can say with the Apostle Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The goal of the Christian life is to acquire Christ, to become a receptacle for Christ, to become an instrument in His hands. It is for this purpose that we come to the Church of God, for this purpose we participate in the Divine Liturgy, and for this purpose that we receive the Holy Mysteries of Christ. We receive the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, inside of us, so that we can be crucified with Him, and so that it would no longer be us who would live, but Christ Who would live in us. Through this "death" with Christ, through this crucifixion, through bearing our own cross, we grow closer to him and share in his suffering and death. By accepting Him within ourselves, we accept all of His teachings and all of His commandments. The Lord commands us to be obedient to Him and to imitate Him, just as many saints, throughout the centuries of the Christian Church, have imitated Him, to a greater or lesser degree, and have grown closer to the ideal that is depicted for us in the Gospel. We will remember all of this as we bow down and venerate the Holy Cross today. Let us kiss that Holy Cross with gratitude to God for showing us the way to salvation, for the fact that He bore His own Cross, and helps us to bear our cross as well. And

let us ask Him to grant every single one of us the opportunity to walk to the end along the path which He outlined for us and successfully reach Holy Week, Pascha, and ultimately the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen. ~ Based on a sermon by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)

