

**3RD SUNDAY OF THE GREAT FAST ~ VENERATION OF THE HOLY, MOST PRECIOUS AND LIFE-GIVING CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST**

**Mark 8:34-9:1**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**

**St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, March 27, 2022**

We have reached the midpoint of Great Lent. The Church, in her wisdom, has ordained that the Precious and Life-giving Cross of Our Lord should be brought out for veneration on this Sunday. Why? As a comfort to us, to give us strength, and to inspire us. By now we may be feeling fatigued. Perhaps we are feeling weak and tired. We are at the halfway mark. We must push on and not falter. We must continue to struggle and to keep the fast. We must continue in our prayers and other Lenten activities. What is it about the Cross that offers us strength, inspiration and comfort?

First of all, we must understand God correctly. As Father Alexander Schmemmann points out, some people think that our Savior's mission is to solve our problems. No! Jesus Christ did not come into the world to solve our problems. What the Lord instead offers us is a Cross. Many people consider the way of the Cross to be scandalous, and they, therefore reject the Cross. The way of the Cross is a lifetime of suffering, self-sacrifice, patience, and endurance. Many people have no use for this type of life and instead seek a life of self-worship, self-satisfaction, selfishness, and earthly, sensual pleasures. These hedonists fail to realize two things: 1. carnal pleasure is fleeting, superficial, and temporary, and no carnal pleasure can compare to the profound joy experienced by the life in Christ and 2. this earth will pass away, and beyond this sinful world is eternal life in Christ. Woe to those who have not prepared themselves for the eternal life in Christ! We will all be immersed in what Holy Scripture calls "the river of fire," which is the love and grace of the Holy Spirit. For those who have repented of their sins and valiantly and faithfully carried their cross in this life and lived by the Gospel, the river of fire will be what we call "Heaven." And for those who have rejected the Cross and Christ, who have neglected their spiritual lives and spent their lives seeking carnal and earthly pleasures, who have not lived by the Gospel, the river of fire will burn them and they will be in what we call "Hell."

Our Savior Jesus Christ does not ask anything from us that He did not fulfill Himself as a human being. It is the hypocrite who asks others to do what he himself does not and cannot do. Jesus was faithful to the end. He carried His Cross willingly for the sake of mankind. He hung upon it and died on it. However, in doing so, He conquered death and brought salvation and eternal life to mankind. Jesus says that anyone who wishes to follow Him must first take up their cross and then follow Him. The powerful symbol of our faith is the Cross. We bless ourselves constantly with the sign of the Cross. All sacred vessels and holy things are inscribed with the Cross. The footstool of the graves of our loved ones is traditionally marked by a Cross. The Cross burns the Devil and the demons and the Cross protects us from sin and evil.

When St. Nektarios of Aegina was wrongfully slandered and forced to leave his diocese, the holy bishop found himself without an income or a position in the Church. He found succor and comfort by daily praying in front of the Cross of our Lord in his little apartment in Athens. If the Son of God could willingly allow Himself to be nailed to a cross, then how can we complain and not be able to endure the sufferings that we face in life? Great Lent is not only obedience to the Church and her teachings. The Great Fast is kept not only because we *have to*, but because we *want to*. On the first preparatory Sunday before Great Lent, on Zaccheus Sunday, didn't we learn that the first prerequisite in order to keep Great Lent, the Great Fast, was that we must *desire* it? Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us gaze at this wonder, the Son of God hanging on the Cross. Let us crucify *willingly* our flesh and spirit to the passions and to all sin. Let us draw power, comfort and inspiration by gazing at the Son of God hanging on the Cross for our salvation. Let us continue to carry the cross of the Great Fast to the very end, to the

Bright and Mystical Pascha of the Lord. And if the cross may seem heavy, and if perchance, we may falter and our knees grow weak, let us not give up but push on, the same way that our Savior pushed on and remained obedient and humble as He willingly endured the suffering of the crucifixion. Lord Jesus Christ, grant us a spirit of humble obedience, faith, and a firm and resolute will to steadily carry the holy Cross, not only for the remainder of the Great Fast, but for our entire lives. Amen.

