

SERMON ON THE SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY - February 25, 2018

In today's Epistle reading, we hear about the great prophet Moses. Imagine being raised by the King's daughter and adopted into the King's household. How could it get any better in this world? You would have all the money, prestige and power that you could imagine. People would bow down to you and fear you. You would live in a palace, eat and drink sumptuously, and all your earthly pleasures and desires would be fulfilled. You could spend money like water, and your treasury would never run out. Moses was born a Hebrew and he knew it. Pharaoh's barbarian daughter may have adopted Moses from babyhood, but it was Moses's Hebrew mother who nursed him and raised him to have faith in the one true God. God was more important to Moses than any earthly or carnal pleasure or desire. Faith and love for God burned in the heart of Moses. It is because of his faith that the sufferings of the Hebrews was preferable to Moses rather than the riches and life of a prince. One of the greatest gifts of grace is to see and experience God with our hearts and experience the love of God. That which is invisible becomes a reality and His presence is felt and known. Moses saw God with his mind and heart and always remembered the overwhelming feeling of God's love for us. It is this experience which makes all things endurable for us, all things tolerable, all things easy to bear. When Moses delighted in this remembrance, he could endure pain and had no fear of anything dangerous. Things are difficult for us when we don't remember God as we should and when we don't always carry Him in our thoughts. The effect of God's remembrance is very great. We can reject bad things and choose that which is good. We can accomplish good things and bring them to fruition. The most splendid things are the things which relate to God, and everything else is but a shadow. As magnificent and enticing the beauty of nature is, it is only a reflection of the unsurpassable beauty of the Creator. If we have the fear of God and suffer poverty, captivity, disease, torture and every other grievous thing, all these things will themselves work for us the other way and for our salvation. In a sense, we can say that if we forget God, then God will forget us. Faith as a seed planted within us is such a common image that we encounter in the Word of God. The seeds of grace and the seed of faith which are planted within us need to be nourished and fed. Without watering and sunshine a plant will die. I was once away from home for a long time. During my absence I entrusted a beloved bonsai that I owned to someone's care. For those who don't know, a bonsai is a tree that has been trained to remain small and never reach its adult size. There was a misunderstanding, and my friend to whom I entrusted the tree sprayed the branches and leaves daily with water, but never watered the roots and the soil. Needless to say, my tree died. It is not sufficient to nourish the seed of faith superficially. If not tended to properly, it will die. How do we water and nourish our faith and make it grow? We pray, we fast, we read the Word of God, we read books by the Fathers and Mothers of the church, we worship in the assembly of the Christians, we confess our sins and repent and we receive and are nourished by the Body and Blood of our Lord. The Christians of the first century understood that continuing the action of Jesus at the Mystical Supper and celebrating the Divine Eucharist was a matter of grave importance. It was so important that it was the center of the Church's life. Community is at the very core of the Christian life. The early Church had a saying, "unus Christianus, nullus Christianus." **One Christian, no Christian.** The very fabric of our faith is experienced in community. The structure of the celebration of the Eucharist was already set up in the first century. The order is as follows: lections, sermon, intercessory prayers, kiss of peace, offering of the bread and wine, anaphora (consecration prayer), and Holy Communion. It is this basic structure that we still follow today in the Divine Liturgy. All of these parts together were and are absolutely necessary. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, in his book "The Eucharist," states that it is the loss of this understanding of the necessity to gather in assembly and to celebrate the Eucharist in the Divine Liturgy in its totality that is perhaps the greatest heresy of our time. It is impossible to be a Christian and not have that sense of urgency, as did the early Christians, that this full gathering in the assembly of the church for the Eucharist is the center of the Church's life. If any ingredient is omitted, if any ingredient is neglected, the seed of faith is in danger of dying.

Brothers and Sisters, we have reached the first Sunday of Great Lent. If we wish to obtain all good things, let us seek the things of God. Let our desire and remembrance of God be resolute and unswerving. May we continue in the 40 day fast with our humble struggles. If we do this, God will not abandon us. If we do this, we will see with our hearts that which is invisible to our eyes. If we do this, grace will show us God's love. If we do this, the words spoken by the Lord to Nathanael in the Gospel today will be true for us as well. "You shall see greater things than these...Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." Amen.