

SERMON - 8/13/17 - JESUS HEALS THE EPILEPTIC - THE QUESTION OF FAITH

In the Gospel today, we see again that the disciples are growing spiritually and still have weak faith. Jesus tells them that if they have faith the size of a mustard seed they can move mountains, let alone cure a possessed child. Why did Jesus use the mustard seed as an example? An average mustard seed is 1-3 millimeters in size, very tiny, and very small. A mature mustard shrub grows from 6 to 20 feet in height with a span of 20 feet. A tiny amount of true faith can move mountains, and even more than that, because Jesus adds "For nothing shall be impossible for you."

Concerning faith and moving mountains, the following event occurred in the life of the Venerable Mark of Athens, who was an early ascetic that struggled in piety as a hermit. He lived in a cave high up on a mountain which was located between Egypt and Ethiopia. When St. Mark received as a visitor the monk Serapion, St. Mark's only contact with a human being after 95 years of solitude, this is what transpired: "During his conversation with Abba Serapion, St. Mark inquired how things stood in the world. He asked about the Church of Christ, and whether persecutions against Christians still continued. Hearing that idol worship had ceased long ago, the saint rejoiced and asked, "Are there now in the world saints working miracles, as the Lord spoke of in His Gospel, 'If ye have faith even as a grain of mustard seed, ye will say to this mountain, move from that place, and it will move, and nothing shall be impossible for you' (Mt.17:20)?"

As the saint spoke these words, the mountain moved from its place 5,000 cubits (approximately 2.5 kilometers) and went toward the sea. When St. Mark saw that the mountain had moved, he said, "I did not order you to move from your place, but was conversing with a brother. Go back to your place!" After this, the mountain actually returned to its place. Abba Serapion fell down in fright. St. Mark took him by the hand and asked, "Have you never seen such miracles in your lifetime?"

"No, Father," Abba Serapion replied. Then St. Mark wept bitterly and said, "Alas, today there are Christians in name only, but not in deeds."

Also concerning faith and similar miracles, let's listen to how the earthly life of the Holy Protomartyr Thekla came to an end: St. Thekla led the ascetic life for almost 72 years living in a cave in modern day Maloula, a city in modern day Syria, 34 miles (55 kilometers) northeast of Damascus. St. Thekla worked many miracles, healing the sick for free by the power and grace of Christ. When St. Thekla was already a 90 year old woman, the envious pagan doctors of the town sent dissolute young men to defile her. When they came near her, St. Thekla cried out for help to Christ the Savior. The rock miraculously split open and St. Thekla entered into the rock and disappeared beneath the earth. Thus did the holy virgin, the bride of Christ, offer up her holy soul to the Lord.

In the life of St. Gregory the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Neocaesarea, a large stone shifted from its place at his word. Another time, during the construction of a church, the saint commanded a hill to move and make room at the place of the foundation.

Jesus imputes the greater fault for the failure to cure the child to the father of the child himself as well as the Jews in general, who the Lord refers to as a faithless and perverse generation. The father of the child keeps saying to Jesus, "If you can," which are the words of a faithless person. Jesus corrects the father by telling him that if he has even a small amount of faith, not only can Jesus, but the disciples and even the father himself can cure the child. And having spoken thus, Jesus then casts the demon from the child, as if to seal His words and visibly demonstrate what is possible to those who have true faith. Jesus uses this occasion to teach his disciples and us, not only the power of faith, but the power and necessity of prayer and

fasting. Jesus makes His doctrine very clear. It is not faith alone, not prayer alone, and not fasting alone, but all three are required of all of us if we will become vessels and repositories of the grace and spirit of the power of God. If the Church is a hospital, then here is the prescription for our healing and for good spiritual and physical health: faith, prayer and fasting. Brothers and Sisters, let us never speak lightly of these things, or think that we do not need them, nor neglect practicing them. On the contrary, with fear and trepidation, let us cultivate a strong and true faith and we will be able to endure all sufferings and sorrows of which this life is so replete. If we would have a strong faith, then we will be able to face every challenge and obstacle that this life and this world would put in our path. Let us never put down our weapons of prayer and fasting, lest our demonic enemies seize the moment and take advantage of us. For when we neglect and put down our spiritual weapons, then we open ourselves up and become easy targets for the demons to possess our hearts and minds and to corrupt our spirits and bodies with sin and death. With fear and faith in God, with prayer and fasting, may we attain the good things here and those to come, by the grace and love towards mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and power with the Father and the Holy Spirit unto ages of ages, Amen.