

SERMON - ST. THOMAS SUNDAY - April 15, 2018 - ON FAITH

After the crucifixion of our Lord, and prior to the revelation of His resurrection to His disciples, the early Christians were living in fear of the Jews. The Apostle Thomas alone had the courage to go into the village to purchase provisions for the Apostles, who were literally hiding behind closed doors. It was at this time that our Lord chose to make His first appearance to the Apostles after having risen from the dead. When St. Thomas returned, he was naturally upset. He was the only Apostle to have the courage to go out and help the Apostles and purchase provisions, putting his very life at risk. As a result of his good and brave intention and action, he was absent when the Lord made His appearance. Thomas declares that he will not believe that the Lord has risen until he verifies the Resurrection by actually touching the wounds in the hands and side of our Lord. Until that time should come, he will not believe. Wouldn't any of us also be upset like Thomas in this instance? Eight days later the Lord appears to the Apostles again and this time Thomas is present. He invites Thomas to touch the print of the nails and the wound in His side, and to not be faithless but to believe. The icons depict Thomas touching the side of our Lord. I don't know whether or not Thomas actually touched the wounds of our Lord (it does not say specifically in the Gospel), but Thomas has no problem declaring his faith and saying "My Lord and my God!" Our Lord arranged this for our sake and to help us with our own struggle to have faith and to believe. It is a lesson to us in faith. We cannot see the Lord with our physical eyes, and we do not have the opportunity to physically verify the Resurrection and place our fingers and our hand into the physical wounds of the Resurrected Lord. Yet, like Thomas when he was absent when the Lord made his appearance, we are called upon to have faith and to believe.

Fr. James Bernstein was an Orthodox Jew who converted to Christianity and is now an Orthodox priest. His father was a rabbi. Fr. James told me that because of the holocaust many Jews lost their faith. They could not understand how God would permit such atrocities and horrible suffering. I recently watched a documentary about Jews who served as American GIs in WW II. One Orthodox Jew related that during battle he witnessed many GIs who prayed and nonetheless were killed. He said that this experience diminished his faith.

On the other hand, I recall men such as Fr. Arseny, an Orthodox priest incarcerated in a Soviet concentration camp. He was exposed to the worst suffering and tortures imaginable, and yet his faith never wavered but remained strong. In the midst of the most horrible conditions imaginable, he still managed to minister to his fellow inmates as a priest as much as he could. After many years of suffering, Fr. Arsenios managed to survive his incarceration and later in life returned to functioning as a parish priest. You can read about him in the books "Father Arseny, Priest, Prisoner and Spiritual Father" and "Fr. Arseny: A Cloud of Witness," both translated by Vera Bouteneff and printed by SVS Press.

After the Apostles become witnesses to the Resurrection, they boldly appear in public and preach the Word and the Good News. Their preaching is accompanied by signs and miracles. We heard today in the Book of Acts that a multitude of sick and those with unclean spirits were brought to the Apostles, and even Peter's shadow was efficacious to their healing. We heard in the Book of Acts today that "more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." The early Christians lived in great danger because of their faith in Christ. They suffered severe persecution from the Jews and the Romans. Many were imprisoned, tortured and killed on account of their faith. All of the Apostles, except for St. John the Theologian, were martyred for the Faith.

Part of our Christian faith is that it is absolutely necessary, because we live in a fallen world, that suffering must play a role in our salvation. When we face various difficulties and temptations in our life, the Lord invites us to take up our cross and to follow Him.

I had the personal privilege to know and study, albeit only for a short time, under one of the most prominent and brilliant theologians of our time - Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann. No one that I know had greater faith or love of our Lord than Fr. Alexander. His entire life was dedicated to serving our Lord as an educator, priest and Spiritual Father to many. Beginning in the 1950's, for thirty years he broadcast hundreds of sermons to Russia over Radio Liberty. Father encouraged the Russians living under an atheistic, materialistic and repressive regime to have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In 1982 Fr. Alexander began the greatest challenge to his own faith that he would face in his life. He felt ill for a long time but struggled to continue in his duties as dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary. During a lengthy stay at New York Hospital his condition was finally diagnosed as cancer. He was 61 years old. Father received treatment, but his health continued to decline until his untimely death in 1983. Father served, preached, taught and fulfilled his duties as dean for as long as he could, as well as he could, until it became physically impossible for him to do so. He never wavered in his faith and love in our Lord. His diaries have come down to us, and one can read about his thoughts and feelings as he struggled with his illness and while facing an early death. Father Alexander preached his last sermon on Thanksgiving Day in 1983, in the chapel of St. Vladimir's Seminary. He died one month later at the age of 62. Here is a sample of Fr. Alexander's last sermon, given as he stood at death's doorstep: "Thank you, O Lord, for the sufferings You bestowed upon us, for they are purifying us from selfishness and reminding us of the "one thing needed;" Your eternal Kingdom...Thank You, O Lord, for everyone and everything...Thank You, O Lord, for having helped us to overcome all difficulties, tensions, passions, temptations and restored peace, mutual love and joy in sharing the communion of the Holy Spirit.....Thank You, O Lord, for our families: husbands, wives and, especially, children who teach us how to celebrate Your holy Name in joy, movement and holy noise...Lord, it is good to be here! Amen."