

SERMON on the Sunday after the Elevation of the Cross, September 15, 2019
Mark 8:34-9:1

Archimandrite Ilarion, in his book, "A Beacon of Hope," reminds us that today, in venerating the Life-giving Cross, that it is the love of God that is hanging on the Cross. This is why the meaning and purpose of Christian life is sacrificial love.

There was a monk who spent many years in ascetic labor, then went to his elder and told him, "Father, I have copied out all the Holy Scriptures." The elder replied, "You've merely filled the air with emptiness." Another monk came to the same elder: "Father, I have learned the entire Bible by heart." The elder told him, "That doesn't mean anything either." A third monk came and said, "Father, I have received the gift of working miracles." "You have angered the Lord," said the elder. All three monks fell silent, confused. The elder then said to them, "If you had told me that you had come to a realization of your unworthiness, had seen your sins and lamented them, or had learned to love every man as your brother, bearing his infirmities and faults, and that you never experience unfriendliness, remembrance of wrongs, or anger in your hearts, then I would have replied that you were on the right, narrow path intended for every Christian."

Another event we commemorate today is the return of the Lord's Cross to Jerusalem by the Byzantine emperor Heracles in the year 629, after it was carried off by the Persians. Upon entering Jerusalem, Heracles shouldered the Cross of the Lord and carried it, like Christ, up to Golgotha. When he reached the gates leading to the Place of the Skull, however, he was stopped by an invisible force. The emperor, who was dressed in magnificent royal robes, decorated with gold and precious stones, was accompanied by Patriarch Zacharius of Constantinople, who saw an angel of God barring the entrance to Heracles. The angel said to the patriarch, "Not thus did our Creator carry the precious tree to this place, as you are carrying it." Patriarch Zacharius relayed the angel's words to Heracles and added, "If you wish to carry in the Cross, imitate the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ." At this admonition, the emperor removed his precious clothes, put on poor and simple clothes, and walking barefoot, carried the Cross of the Lord to Golgotha without hindrance.

In the oldest teachings about monasticism, the monk is instructed to wear clothes that were he to leave them out in the street, no one would wear them but throw them away, considering them to be useless and un wearable garbage. How many times is it recorded in the lives of the great monastic saints, such as St. Sergius of Radonezh, that his cassock was so old and worn it was covered with patches upon patches. The oldest monastic teachings also instruct the monastics to go barefoot. In our own times we see this strictness of the monastic life lived in the lives of such saints Archbishop John Maximovitch and the Elder Joseph the Cave-dweller of Mt. Athos. Sadly, in Vladika John's life, there were some who were disgusted by his appearance and considered him to be a fool. These are people who were egotistical and carnal in nature, their hearts very far from God, and therefore unable to comprehend or experience the sanctity of Vladika John. Then there were others who had humility and love, who saw and repented often for their sins, who could receive the holiness and godliness of St. John. It was the same with the Elder Joseph. Many of his own monastic brothers considered him to be spiritually deluded and mentally unbalanced, unable to appreciate and see the holiness of this great saint.

Salvation is twofold. The first part has been accomplished by our Lord. He willingly humbled Himself to become one of His creation, to live and walk on the earth as a man, and to voluntarily endure all the sufferings of His Holy Passion and death itself so that life could be restored to mankind. However, salvation is not a passive thing. We don't merely sit back and reap the benefits of what the Lord has done for us. Salvation, on the contrary, is a very active

thing. First, it was the actions wrought by our Savior Himself. And secondly, we must now act, for the Lord tells us that if we would be His disciples, we must deny ourselves and voluntarily lift up our own Cross and follow Him. We must imitate the Lord by accepting the sufferings in our life, and by denying any desires or self-will that would take us off of the strait and narrow path of Christianity and the gospel. We are told that the way to perdition is very wide, but the way to salvation is narrow and straight, with very little wiggle room. If we have love and sincerity, if we repent and ask the Lord daily to forgive us our mistakes and weaknesses, if we love and care for our brother and sister, if we have humility and consider ourselves to be the worst of sinners and everyone else better than us, then we are on the straight and narrow path. Sometimes our Cross may seem heavy and difficult to carry, but remember the words of our Lord, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30)