

## **SERMON on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, March 17, 2019**

In John 16:33 our Savior says to His disciples, "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." St. John writes in his first epistle, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (1 John 5:4). Today on the first Sunday of the Great Fast the Orthodox Church celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy, celebrates the triumph of the Orthodox Faith over all error, falsehood and persecution which has tried for centuries to undermine the Church on her bright and suffering path.

From the very beginning the Church was assailed with divisions, temptations and persecutions. One of the earliest causes of strife and division was the controversy of whether or not Gentile converts were required to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law. This was a major controversy that was so acute that the church hierarchy in Jerusalem had to intervene. You can read about it in the Book of Acts. A compromise was made which tried to appease both sides and keep peace in the church, but once you try to sanction division you are creating factions and you are doomed to failure. In the Liturgy we pray that we may all be of one mind and one heart. The Church has always tried to follow the rule of love and compassion. By the same token, the Church has never shied away from speaking and proclaiming the truth. The very word "devil" means liar, deceiver. Concerning false doctrines and speaking truth, the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:14-15, "...so that we may no longer be children, tossed back and forth and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." A clear and concise exposition of the Holy Orthodox Faith can be found in the Creed, the final version being accepted by the universal Church in Constantinople in the year 381. Great martyrs and confessors willingly spilled their blood and accepted imprisonment, exile, torture and execution rather than betray the true faith as outlined in the Creed.

The Orthodox Church, in her proclamation of the truth, passes judgment on no one. God alone is judge and we should only pass judgment on ourselves. The Church discerns right from wrong and truth from falsehood, but in doing so never casts judgment on individual souls. Having the privilege to belong to the Orthodox Church is not an occasion for arrogance, pride or being pharisaic. On the contrary, being an Orthodox Christian is very humbling, because we see how far we fall short of the mark and bar which is set for us by our Lord. On this day more than at any other time we should make an account of our own orthodoxy and how well we keep or do not keep the Orthodox faith, whether our thoughts, words and beliefs are backed up with actual deeds and actions.

Today, as we celebrate our Holy Faith itself, I leave you with the Shema, the Great Commandment of Israel which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Amen!