

THE APOSTLE OF OUR TIME
Sunday of Zacchaeus
By His Beatitude Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)
February 2, 2014

Moscow, Church of the Icon of the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow”

I would like to offer my heartfelt greetings to our guest from the Japanese Autonomous Orthodox Church, Vladika Seraphim, with whom we have been associated, met with and known for many years, and with whom we accompanied the Most Holy Patriarch Kirill when His All Holiness visited the Japanese land.

All of you, of course, remember that not long ago, less than two years ago, Japan was struck by a natural disaster. Many people perished, many cities suffered and in particular, several churches were damaged which were headed by Archbishop Seraphim of the Sendai Diocese of the Japanese Orthodox Church.

The entire Russian Orthodox Church, including our parish, raised funds in order to help restore the churches which were damaged by the disaster. The funds were transferred to the Japanese Orthodox Church. With God’s help the churches were restored and we were glad to have been able to contribute our small mite for their restoration.

We are honored to now have in our church a portion of the sacred relics the Holy Equal-to-the-apostles Nicholas of Japan. We thank you, dear Vladika, for this precious gift.

When we think about the struggles of St. Nicholas, we think about the apostolic times, because the Church glorified him as an Equal-to-the-apostles. We are reminded of the time when the Holy Apostles, after the Resurrection of Christ, dispersed into various lands. They traversed through pagan cities and captured the souls of people one by one, two by two, family by family and created Christian communities that, of course, in the beginning were comprised of very few members. The early Christians would meet in secret. At that time there were no majestic churches, there were no icons and there were no Christian frescoes on the walls. The small Christian communities, headed by the apostles, would gather in private homes. Later they were headed by their successors, the bishops. The Word of Christ was preached in these communities and the people were united in the Holy Eucharist, the remembrance of the Mystical Supper, which was offered every week on the Day of the Lord, that is to say, on Sunday.

The disciples of Christ would gather secretly in these homes and could feel among themselves the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The apostles would relate stories about Christ, and from these stories and accounts the four Gospels were later created which we read today. In the beginning written texts did not exist, and the stories and accounts of the apostles were told from memory. It was only later on that this sacred history was recorded in writing and began to be read. The New Testament itself became a sacred item, which was not only read by the Christians but solemnly venerated at the Divine services. We do the same thing today during the small entrance at the Divine Liturgy when the Gospel is carried to the middle of the church and we solemnly lift it up and place it on the altar table. We do this because the Gospel is the very Word of Christ which was put on paper by the apostles, so that we would not forget anything that they preached, so that the words of Christ would reach us the same way that they were remembered by the apostles and in order for us to be able to learn about the events in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ which occurred when He walked upon the earth.

We heard in the Gospel reading today about one such event. A man of short stature who had a profession that was despised — a publican, a collector of taxes — very much wanted to see our Savior. Because of his short stature Zacchaeus was not able to see our Lord, because a large crowd had gathered around our Savior. Zacchaeus then climbed a sycamore tree in order to be able to watch the Messiah as He passed by. The Lord saw Zacchaeus sitting in the tree branches and turned to him saying, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). With joy Zacchaeus climbed down from the sycamore

tree, brought the Lord to his home and said to Him, “The half of my goods I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will restore it fourfold” (Luke 19:8).

The remarkable meeting between the Lord and this unknown, insignificant and despised man, is one of the many events of which the Gospel speaks, because our Lord Jesus Christ, while on the earth, gave his attention to the most diverse people. He noticed those who were not noticed by others, — the most insignificant, despised and sinful people, even those who were surrounded by people ready to kill them with stones, He noticed and gave His attention to them, forgave them their sins, and did not judge them.

Meeting our Lord was a crucial moment in their lives, as it was in the life of the publican Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus probably never imagined that the Lord Himself would visit his home, but at best only hoped that he would be able to see the Lord as He passed by from up in the tree branches, similar to how on Mount Sinai Moses saw the glory of God pass by, and saw the Lord from behind, as is recorded in the Holy Scripture in the Old Testament. However, the Lord stopped, took notice of this man, and didn't simply take him with Him, but He Himself went into his home, and this encounter with the Lord changed the life of Zacchaeus once and for all.

In the same way, the same thing occurred later on after the Lord ascended into heaven and the apostles brought His Word to the ends of the earth. In a mystical way the souls of men responded to the apostolic preaching. There seemed to be no pre-existing conditions for these Christian communities to be formed. The reason they were created was because people not only heard from the apostles what our Lord Jesus Christ said and did, but because the Lord Himself was with the apostles and was Himself present in the midst of these humble Christian communities which gathered in secret quarters. People could feel the closeness of the Lord and this transfigured and changed their lives.

During February we will remember many saints who labored after the apostles and preached the Gospel and enlightened thousands and millions of people. There is the luminary St. Gregory the Theologian whose memory we will celebrate in a few days, and the luminaries St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom, whose memories we will celebrate together with the memory of Gregory the Theologian. There is the Equal-to-the-apostles St. Nicholas of Japan whose memory is celebrated on the day following the feast of the Meeting of the Lord.

In more recent times the Holy Equal-to-the-apostles Nicholas of Japan repeated the struggle (podvig) of the apostles. He came to a country where, for the duration of many centuries, the preaching of Christianity was forbidden, a country where for centuries Christian missionaries and preachers suffered repression, to a pagan land where there didn't seem to be any pre-existing conditions which were conducive for the spreading of the Christians faith. It is true that Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries had already labored in Japan, but the Orthodox Church had not yet been to the Land of the Rising Sun, except for the small diplomatic corps of the Russian consulate which existed on the territory of Hakodate.

Then the young Priestmonk Nicholas arrived in this country, began to study the Japanese language, and spent the first years of his missionary work learning the language and the culture of the people. He was so successful in this, that according to the testimony of his contemporaries, he learned to speak Japanese better than many of the native Japanese themselves. He undertook the translation of Holy Scripture, liturgical books and catechism into Japanese so that the future Japanese Christians would immediately have the required spiritual literature. Gradually an Orthodox community began to gather around him. The Japanese who turned to the Orthodox faith most likely would never have learned about Orthodoxy or Christ had St. Nicholas never come to their land. Gradually, in various cities Christian communities began to be formed. Fifty years later when the hour of death approached for St. Nicholas of Japan, who was now gray-haired and wizened by experience, across the entire territory of Japan and in various cities and villages there existed more than two hundred churches, more than 30,000 faithful, a few dozen Japanese clergy, and the Orthodox services were served in the Japanese language. Already in our own times St. Nicholas repeated the labors and struggles (podvig) of the Holy Apostles and enlightened an entire country with the light of the Orthodox faith. It is for this reason that he was glorified as an Equal-to-the-apostles.

Today the Japanese Orthodox Church is a beloved daughter of the Russian Orthodox Church. She has the status of autonomy and her Divine services are in the Japanese language. With love she venerates the memory of her founder — the Holy Equal-to-the-apostles Nicholas of Japan.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen