

THE SUNDAY OF THE VENERATION OF THE CROSS
“My Yoke is Easy, and My Burden is Light”
By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev
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We have reached the third Sunday of Great Lent, and the Church brings out for veneration the Holy Cross of the Lord, so that we may draw the strength from its power which is needed in order to complete the struggle (podvig) of the Fast, and to receive the strength to enable us to take up the cross of our earthly life, about which we heard in today’s Gospel reading. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself, directing His attention to each and every one of us, said: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24).

When the Lord spoke these words, probably very few people understood the nature of the Cross that He would carry, as well as the cross that would be entrusted to each Christian, for you see, the apostles had not yet witnessed Christ’s suffering. They saw Him walking about the cities and villages, performing miracles, preaching to the people, but even in their most horrible dreams they could never imagine that the hour was approaching when that Divine Teacher, on Whom they placed all their hopes, would soon be horribly tortured to exhaustion by being mocked, insulted, slandered, beaten and wounded, and that on His very own shoulders He would soon carry a heavy wooden Cross, on which He will be crucified. The meaning of the words of the Lord concerning the Cross became clear to them only after His crucifixion and Resurrection.

During Great Lent we remember the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He endured for the salvation of the world and for the salvation of each of us. We will remember these sufferings with more intensity in three weeks during Passion Week: we will remember how the Lord carried the Cross, — not His cross, but *our* cross, because it was not Him but *us* who needed redemption from sin; it was for our sake that He sacrificed Himself on the Cross.

When the Lord tells us that we must all carry our own cross, by this he means all the sorrows, griefs and sickness which befall us and it is our lot to suffer, those situations and difficulties in life that we must face. The Lord says that the cross which He places on our shoulders must be carried with humility and with remembrance of the meaning of the Cross that He carried. When we encounter suffering or grief, let us never forget that the Lord Himself suffered and died on the Cross, that in our sufferings and trials we are never alone, for our Savior is always with us.

The Cross of Christ possesses great power. According to St. Isaac the Syrian, if God’s glory was present in the ark of the Old Testament, then in the New Testament sign of the Cross God’s glory is present with especially more power — God’s glory and power was transformed from the Ark of the Covenant into the Cross of Christ; and if the Ark of the Covenant was a foreshadow of the Cross, then the Cross, in its turn, is a foreshadow of the Kingdom of God. Every time we bow down and worship the Cross of Christ, we offer worship to Him Who was crucified on it, and we experience the power which emanates from the Cross, just like the woman with the issue of blood, filled with faith in the possibility of healing, touched our Savior, touched the hem of His garment, and felt the power which emanated from Him (Mt. 9:20-21; Lk. 8:43-44).

The Cross of Christ protects us and drives away from us every evil. This is why many times in the course of the day, before all sorts of activities — during prayer, before meals, before going to sleep, after waking up — we make the sign of the cross, knowing, that every time we do this, evil powers are driven away from us. It is for this reason that each of us wears a cross around our neck — so that it will protect us and drive away from us every evil.

The Cross of Christ is filled with grace-filled power, and therefore, during Great Lent, as well as during evening prayers and throughout the year, we pray not only to our Lord Jesus Christ, but to the very Cross of Christ itself, for we know that through His Cross the Lord gives us the power and strength to carry and bear our cross in this life.

The Lord calls us to carry our cross and to follow Him. We are also called upon to help other people,— those who are sent to us by the Lord Himself,— to help them to also embark on this path so that through the Cross of Christ they will receive salvation and eternal life.

The Holy Fathers teach us that God never sends us temptation which is greater than our strength to endure. The Lord tells us: “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” (Mt. 11:29-30). This is that cross which the Lord places on the shoulders of each of us. Let us carry it offering thanks to the Lord, that our cross is not as heavy as it could be, that it is infinitely lighter than the one which contains the sins of the whole world and the suffering of all mankind, the one that our Savior carried on His shoulders.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen