

## The Labor of Believing

On this Sunday before the Exaltation of the life-giving Cross, the Church prescribes two readings. The Gospel reading that is assigned to the Sunday before the Exaltation of the Cross is from John 3:13-17.

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

The additional reading for today, the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, is taken from the Gospel according to St. Matthew 22:1-14.

And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.

What a striking contrast between these two readings! In the first, we are offered a message of great hope and encouragement: That whosoever **believeth** in him should not perish, but have eternal life! This extraordinary and hope-filled promise is re-iterated at various other points in the Holy Gospel: He that **believeth** on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life (John

3:36); Jesus saith unto him, If thou canst **believe**, all things are possible to him that believeth (Mark 9:23); And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that **believeth** on me shall never thirst (John 6:35); He that **believeth** on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water (John 7:38); And whosoever liveth and **believeth** in me shall never die. (John 11:26); To him give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever **believeth** in him shall receive remission of sins (Acts 10:43).

Is it therefore enough to “believe”? To simply profess and accept Christ to be the Saviour of mankind? The Incarnate God-man? Is this all that is needed to be saved? But, even the demons believed! Will they too be saved?

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble (James 2:19).

In the second Gospel reading according to St. Matthew, we shift to a somewhat different scenario that is presented in the spirit of caution and admonition. At the preparation for the wedding feast, which is God’s invitation to eternal life and unending joy in His kingdom, the first invited guests rejected our Lord, choosing not to believe in Him and placing more faith in themselves and their immediate needs. But the poor man, who was singled out for not wearing a wedding garment, initially accepted our Lord’s invitation. He believed. Yet, he was thrust out! How do we reconcile these two contrasting readings and messages? One is of great hope, and the other cites dire and grave consequences? Of course, when such questions arise, it is always good to tap the font of “living waters”, namely, the God-inspired writings of the saints. St. Gregory Palamas writes:

Let us lay aside the old man, ‘which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts’ (Eph. 4:22), and put on the new man, which after God is created in holiness and righteousness (*cf.* Eph. 4:24). Let us take off our life’s complex covering of rapacity and greed, since it is ugly in God’s sight and condemned, and let us put on, as the elect of God, compassion, humility, modesty and meekness (*cf.* Col. 3:12). And let us strive in all ways, according to the apostle’s exhortation, to make our calling and election sure (*cf.* 2 Pet. 1:10). By doing so, we shall not fail to attain to the promise of good things to come, and the company of those who rejoice eternally.

This “company” is those who are “chosen” to remain at the eternal wedding feast of God’s boundless love and bliss. Thus, to simply “believe” in mind, without the labors of warring with the passions and repenting of falls, as well as the toil of acquiring the salvific garment of virtue, is insufficient and potentially leads us to the tragic fate of the poor man ousted from Paradise. St. Basil the Great also writes:

I ask you, therefore, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins, to show every concern for your soul. For we must repent for the vanity of our former life and strive for those things that will add to the glory of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Let us abandon a dissolute life of ease and that slowness which ensures that we always miss the opportunity when it arises or put it off until tomorrow or the distant future: for otherwise we may be found wanting in just deeds by the one who demands our souls, and be thrown out of the bride-chamber, shedding vain and useless tears, and lamenting our ill-spent life, at a time when it is too late to repent.

The Apostle says: 'Now is the right time, now is the day of salvation'. Now is the time for us to repent, work, and show patience; in the future we shall find our reward, recompense and comfort. It is in the present that God gives us help to avoid the path of evil, but in the future he will be a stern and inexorable examiner of all actions, words and thoughts. Now we may enjoy His gentle patience, but then we shall discover His justice when we shall rise again, some to eternal punishment, others to eternal life, and each shall receive according to their works.

Yes, the reward of eternal life is promised to all who believe, but the belief (faith) needs to be demonstrated by works:

He shall reward every man according to his works. (Matthew 16:27)

What are these works? As the holy saints make clear, the works of repentance, self-denial, compassion, unconditional love, patience, mercy and kindness. Through the prayers of the holy saints, may we be granted strength to make the continual effort of faith, shedding the old man, and pursuing works of virtue that restore the image and likeness of God within us, donning the cleansed and purified wedding garment and thus drawing God's boundless mercy and grace!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.