

September 11, 2018

Greetings to all the Faithful of St. Andrew's,

Christ is among us!

This Friday, Sept. 14 is the celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross. I offer the following thoughts on the meaning "**Taking up one's cross.**"

I would like to start with some ideas on what taking up the cross is **not**:

Taking up one's cross is **not "sacrificial" giving** of what "belongs" to us.

Nothing "belongs" to us. Only our sin belongs to us. What sin? The sin of self-sufficiency and an attitude of ownership and control. We own nothing, not even our own lives. God gives life and provides for life. He is the source, the owner, and the one in control of life and death.

One may have received an inheritance from a wealthy relative and think that one is "sacrificing" for God by giving away large sums to help others. There is a trap here. Giving away what God has entrusted to us is not a sacrifice, for it was never ours to begin with. The only reason we have any resources is to fulfil the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Again, we may through "hard work" have amassed large sums we sacrificially distribute to the needy. Once again sin may be crouching at the door of our hearts. If we imagine that the resources for which we have toiled belong to us because our own hands have the callouses, then we have fallen into the falsehood of believing that we are the self-sufficient source and owner of what we possess and the one who is in control. In this we stand in opposition to God who alone distributes, owns, and controls what happens to us. Giving in order to benefit others is not a sacrifice but a responsibility. Jesus said to his disciples: "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10). Taking up one's cross is not "sacrificial giving" per se. This may be an aspect of taking up one's cross but taking up one's cross cannot be reduced to this.

Taking up one's cross is **not acceptance of disadvantages.**

We often hear of people "bearing their crosses" in this life. We think of "accepting the cross we've been given," by which we mean accepting some hardship, sickness, or difficulty. Perhaps we imagine bearing our problems with a stoic resolve is "taking up one's cross." We may think "bearing one's cross" is tolerating some annoyance or accepting without complaint some unwelcome difficulty. Everyone, whether rich or poor, experiences pain, disadvantages of every kind that come unbidden, unwelcome. Suffering without complaining is not bearing one's cross. The Apostle Paul wrote: "Do all things without grumbling" (Phil. 2:14). This may be an aspect of bearing one's cross but may not be reduced to this.

Our life circumstances are the context in which we are called to "take up one's cross" of course. Whether we are rich or poor, young or old, going through "hard times" or "good times" does not

contribute to or take away from the call of Jesus to take up one's cross. No Christian, no matter who they are or what their circumstance, is exempt from this call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus their Lord. Certainly, what one does with what one has or does not have - as well as how one reacts to one's circumstances in love - is to be an expression of taking up one's cross, but taking up one's cross is not defined by these.

What then does taking up one's cross mean?

First let's put crucifixion in its context. Those sentenced to death by Rome by means of crucifixion would have been non-Roman citizens, foreigners without legal rights and thus treated as lesser beings. (On the other hand, Roman citizens sentenced to death were not subjected to the brutality and humiliation of crucifixion but would receive death by beheading.) After a non-citizen was sentenced to death by crucifixion he would be made to carry the cross to the place where he would be crucified. Once the sentence of death was pronounced the end was certain, imminent, and unavoidable. The time between the taking up of one's cross to the time of one's death would be short, perhaps only minutes.

Jesus willingly submitted to the unjust sentence of death, carried his cross, and walked to the place of crucifixion where he met his end. The Father gave him life, sustained his life until the time, by means of Pontius Pilate's imperial prerogative, God took it. The crucifixion was no accident but an expression of God's will, as were the blessings bestowed upon others because of it. Regarding the suffering servant, Isaiah the Prophet said: "By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? . . . *Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand . . .*" (Isaiah 53:8-10).

Job, having suffered great loss, "arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:20-22).

Ultimately, we will all suffer loss of not just our possessions but life itself. To take up one's cross means to willingly accept this loss *before* we experience it. In taking the cross we acknowledge that our end is certain, imminent, and unavoidable. In the taking of the cross we accept our death "in Christ," and thereby show ourselves to be his disciples by following his example. We embrace our death as a sacrifice to the Father. He gave us life, he sustains our life until the end. The taking up of the cross is a statement that death is not just the inevitable end of our biological existence but a sacrifice willingly offered. This call to take up the cross is addressed to all Christians - rich or poor, young or old - no matter the circumstances. This way of the cross of course has consequences for our behavior toward others and dealing with difficult issues, but it is all-encompassing and not reduced to our circumstances and is ultimately life affirming. Our Lord said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever *loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it*" (Mark 8:35).

Taking up one's cross daily is to acknowledge that God is the source of life, that God provides for us in this life, and that our death is also under his control. Jesus lived and died for the glory of God as a sacrifice for the world so that we could offer our whole being to the Father.

Upcoming events: Please participate in the following events generously:

Elevation of the Cross: Friday, Sept. 14. 10 am Divine Liturgy

Fall Cleanup Day & Picnic: Saturday Sept. 15. 9:30 am cleanup; 12 noon picnic (**rain or shine**)

Bishop Thomas' visit Sept. 29 and 30.

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Herman