THIRD SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT
Veneration of the Holy Cross
Annunciation of the Theotokos
25 March / 7 April 2024

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Amen!
Во имя Отца и Сына и Святого Духа! Аминь!

Tone 3

Today our journey to Pascha has reached the Third Sunday of Great Lent, the Sunday of the Veneration of the Holy Cross. Fr Alexander Schmemannn (*Great Lent: Journey to Pascha,* pp.76-78) writes that "…the theme of the Cross…is developed in terms not of suffering but of victory and joy." The vision of the Holy Cross reminds us of what is yet to come on our long journey to Calvary, to the Empty Tomb and to the glory of the Resurrection! Fr Schmemann writes that it is now that "we begin to see the end of our pilgrimage, and the rays of Easter grow in their intensity." While he reminds us of Christ's invitation in today's reading from the Gospel St Mark to take up our cross and follow Him, Fr Schmemann reminds us that "…we can not take up our cross and follow Christ unless we have *His* Cross which He took up in order to save us. It is His Cross, not ours, that saves us. It is His Cross that gives not only meaning but also power to others…Thus, refreshed and reassured, we begin the second part of Lent…" We find similar comments in the second volume of *The Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary* edited by Catherine Aslanoff (p. 55): "When we climb a mountain, we often become discouraged half way up the arduous climb. Suddenly, someone yells out with joy and points out to us the summit, the goal of our climb…It is with the same intent that the Church places the victorious cross in the middle of Great Lent, to remind us of our journey, the meaning of our penitence, leading us to Pascha, where blooms the Tree of Life".

1st Gospel: Mark 8:34-9:1: Our first Gospel reading this morning comes to us from the *Gospel of St Mark.* As Jesus and His disciples are on their way through the towns of Caesarea Philippi to the north of the Sea of Galilee, He asks them "Who do men say that I am?" While some have said that Jesus is John the Baptist, others have said that He is Elijah, or another one of the prophets. When Jesus asks His disciples who they say He is, Peter answers "You are the Christ." Jesus then tells His followers that the Son of Man – Jesus Himself – "must suffer many things", including death. After three days, however, He will rise again. In St Matthew's Gospel, Peter is shocked by these words, saying to Jesus "this shall not happen to you". Jesus rebukes Peter for this comment, and it is here that this morning's reading from St Mark's Gospel begins. Jesus calls His disciples and the people around Him and says to them "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me". What does this mean? The cross was the instrument of execution used by the Romans. As we shall soon see, it will also become the instrument of redemption. Does Jesus refer to the burden of our own sins or does He speak of being released from them? Once again, the meaning of the words of Jesus are made clear as they relate to that which we call "love", love in the context of the Second Great Commandment! Christian Love is not selfish! Christian Love is not self centered! Concern for the self alone is the path to perdition, the road to self inflicted misery, loneliness and the death of the soul. The human ego destroys the soul – the basic lesson taught to us by the Genesis account of Adam and Eve and the Expulsion from Paradise. What does Jesus tell His listeners? He tells them this: "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it". The basic message is made clear by these words of Jesus: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" Jesus adds another dimension to these words, saying "Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" This is a sink or swim proposition! St Mark's account

of the words of Jesus suggests that there are those – the self centred, the greedy, the egotists who are only in love with themselves - who reject the love, the compassion, the mercy of which Jesus speaks. Of such as these, Jesus says "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." For those who listen and follow these words of divine wisdom, Jesus says simply, calmly, quietly "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God present with power."

This morning we also observe the Annunciation of the Theotokos of which Fr Thomas Hopko (*The Orthodox Faith, vol. ii, Worship,* p.137) writes that "The celebration of the Annunciation…is the feast of our own reception of the glad tidings of salvation, and our own glorification of … Mary who becomes the Mother of God in the flesh". Fr Hopko also reminds us that "Because the feast of the Annunciation normally comes during the season of Great Lent the manner of celebration varies from year to year…" and as such "The Divine Liturgy of the Annunciation is the only celebration of the eucharistic liturgy of Saint john Chrysostom allowed on a week day of Great Lent".

2nd Gospel: Luke 1:24-38: It is in St Luke's Gospel that today we find an account of the Annunciation to Mary. Luke begins with an account of the birth of John the Baptist. Six months later, God sends the angel Gabriel to the city of Nazareth in Galilee. In Nazareth, Gabriel finds the Virgin Mary, betrothed to Joseph, a descendant of the house of David. Gabriel greets Mary, saying to her "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" Luke writes that Mary "was troubled" by Gabriel's words. Gabriel, however, comforts Mary, saying "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive…and bring forth a Son…" Then Gabriel tells Mary that she is to name her child JESUS, adding that "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David". The angel Gabriel continues, telling Mary that her son "… will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Mary, confused by this revelation, says to Gabriel "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" Gabriel answers, saying "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God". It is at this point that the words of Luke's *Gospel* return to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist as the angel Gabriel informs Mary – and us - that "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren". Gabriel continues, saying to Mary that "… with God nothing will be impossible." Joyfully, Mary responds with these words: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." To Mary's words of exultation, Luke adds "And the angel departed from her". Hugh Wybrew (*Orthodox Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary,* p.93) reminds us that Luke's account of the nativity of John the Baptist and Jesus "resembles in some respects the Old Testament stories of the miraculous" births of "such great figures in Israel's history as Samson and Samuel." He also reminds us that the "Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise to God in Luke's Gospel is closely modelled on the Song of Hannah in the 1st Book of Samuel. In an anonymous book, "*These Truths We Hold*" (p.174), we read concerning the Annunciation that Mary's role "in the redemption of the human race cannot be emphasized strongly enough…" as "she was the ladder bridging earth and heaven…"

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1st Epistle: Heb. 4:14-5:6

14 Having therefore a great High Priest Who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast the confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest Who cannot have compassion on our infirmities, but one tempted in all things like as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. 1 For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: 2 who can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also beset by weakness. 3 Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. 4 And no man takes this honor unto himself, but he that is called by God, as was Aaron. 5 So Christ also did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but He that said unto Him: "Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee." 6 As He saith also in another place: "Thou are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek"

2nd Epistle: Heb. 2:11-18 (Theotokos)

11 For both He that sanctifies and they who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12 saying: "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren; in the midst of the Church will I sing praises unto Thee." 13 And again: "I will put My trust in Him." And again: "Behold I and the children which God hath given Me." 14 Forasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16 For verily He took not upon Himself the nature of angels, but He took upon Himself the seed of Abraham. 17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest before God, that He might be a propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For in that He Himself hath suffered and been tempted, He is able to help them also that are being tempted. .