**10th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

In Psalm 116, in St. David asks, “What shall I render to the Lord, for all His bounty to me?” His response to his own question is: “I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call on the Name of the Lord.” Consider all the gifts God has given us before we were even formed: the world that He’s created for us, the beauty of the sea the stars, mountains, and all the animal life upon the earth, and, beyond the creation, His saving acts: the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection. If for a moment we can allow ourselves this level of gratitude to God, we quickly realize that, in a sense, we have nothing to offer that can ‘repay’ God for His bounty and blessing to us.

If we then add to these universal blessings, the personal blessings and gifts given each of us, foremost, the opportunity for new birth in Christ, communion with Him through the Sacraments, healing from our sin-sickness and passions, growth in the knowledge and love of Him, and eternal life with Him, we’re left speechless; we’re awed, humbled, and, I pray, thankful.

St. Gregory Palamas says, “When David, having reflected on the matter, saw everything he had received, and everything given to those who went before him…he understood that the benefits bestowed by God are immeasurable and that, whereas these really are bounties from God for us, the things men offer to God are nothing in comparison.” And so, what does St. David offer in response? He says, “I will offer to Him the sacrifice of thanksgiving.”

Our thanksgiving is the song of praise, the glory we offer to God in worship; it’s our willingness to obediently struggle to live out our life in Christ and prioritize that life above all the temporal preoccupations that otherwise demand our time, energy, and focus. It’s also our willingness to come outside of ourselves to serve Him and His Church, to build up the body of Christ, to witness to His truth and salvation to the world around us. These are all offerings of praise pleasing to God and at the heart of what it is to be a Christian.

Today, we commemorate St. Herman of Alaska, who truly lived to the praise of God’s glory, leading the way, together with the other Saints of Alaska, in giving us a ‘modern’ context for understanding the missionary spirit and zeal for the Gospel that is at the heart of our calling in Christ. You see, St. Herman was not afraid to love the truth. Exercising courageous and humble obedience to his bishop in coming to the raw, difficult, and wild Alaskan frontier, this quiet monk embraced the work of spreading the Gospel and loving the peoples God sent him. He even stood between them and his own countrymen when the latter sought to exploit them. Only an identity grounded in Christ, in the new life in Him, only a thankful and loving heart, enjoys the courage, freedom, and peace to be, “in the world but not of the world” to such an extent.

But how hard it is for us living in a culture where everyone’s a victim, where everyone has a right to complain, where the hallmark of living is to do and pursue “whatever you think makes you happy.” To cultivate and learn to have this attitude of thanksgiving and service is that much less probable when our focus is on ourselves, our own problems, consumed with the preoccupations of the world and what it says we should be about, at the expense of our worship and life in Christ. These distractions keep us from our focus on Christ and make it next to impossible to cultivate the kind of thankful spirit we see in King David.

Pride so easily gets in the way so that we make excuses when it comes to offering up even the minimum we can give God in return for His inexplicable graciousness to us sinners. We can perhaps more easily see the tangible and material benefits of our time spent at work, pursuing some hobby, doing chores at home, or taking care any of the other myriad of problems we have to deal with in the world than serving and loving Christ.

In today’s Gospel, the disciples can’t understand why they cannot cast out the demon. Christ tells them directly, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Likewise, in our own life, there may be a ‘mountain,’ some impediment in the way of our living a more joyous and full life in Christ. Ask yourself, is there anything holding me back from putting Christ and His Church first in my life? Here’s the key: The worship of the Church, our service to the body and then to the world, our coming outside of ourselves, to offer our “sacrifice of thanksgiving,” to lift up the cup of salvation in our hearts, to participate more fully in the sacramental life of Christ in our day to day lives, is the means of our further growth in Christ and the removal of those ‘mountains’ that come between us and God. Increase in faith begins with a desire for more faith, praying for more faith, availing ourselves of what the Church has to offer and in obedience to her teachings. As we cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and make use of the tools God’s entrusted to us, those mountains can be moved!

Coming to church once a week is a first step, but it alone is not enough to counter the culture’s influence on us and the barrage of distractions we’re confronted with day in, day out. Being in the world but not of the world requires vigilance and recognition that we need more faith, that we need our Savior and His work through the body of Christ, the Church, which is here to help us as we encourage, as each of us lives out his or her particular role in the life of the Church. We need, as Christ says, prayer and fasting. We need to listen to Christ and His Church.

But Church can never be just about what’s here for me. If we want the church to make things comfortable for us and do as we bid, serving us only, then we’ve missed the mark and purpose. It is we who serve and build up each other. It is we who are Christ’s ‘workmanship,’ as St. Paul declares. In our Orthodox worship as in our Orthodox understanding of salvation, it’s necessary for us to be willing to come outside of ourselves to serve, to grow, to love more and more. There’s no other way because this is what it means to be and become more and more like Christ.

The worship of the Church guides us in this way, to come outside of ourselves and use all of ourselves in worship. In Orthodox worship, we use all our senses: we see the gilded icons and beautiful vestments reflective of and pointing us towards the heavenly worship, the dignity of the priesthood, we smell the incense, the sweetness of the Kingdom of God and the life that is in Him, we hear the music and the song of praise from our lips and those of our brethren in Christ, we hear the truth of God’s words spoken through the Holy Tradition of the Church—liturgy, Scripture, hymnody. We cross ourselves, touch and kiss the icons, the cross, and, foremost, take Christ, the medicine of immortality, inside ourselves. “We taste and see that the Lord is good.”

And so here we also see the key to moving another mountain: that of building up our mission, growing “in spirit and in numbers,” as we pray in all the divine services. In availing ourselves of church for our own growth, in being energized through the divine worship and our daily prayers and study and praise, we learn more how to courageously love and share our gratitude to God with others so that they too can come to the knowledge and love of Christ as well.

The less time we give to God in worship, both in and outside of Church, the less we’ll benefit from it. But the converse is also true: the more we strive to worship, to give of ourselves to God, the more we avail ourselves of opportunities to have our faith strengthened and our focus on God renewed; the more we serve and give thanks to God, the more we reap the benefits in our spiritual lives and the more we help others to find their healing and salvation as well. The more we partake of the medicine of the spiritual hospital of the Church, the more we heal and grow and make it possible for others to do the same, even as we build up our Mission. Ask yourself, “What shall I render to the Lord?” Whatever you or I manage to offer, God, in His great love and mercy for us, has given us and will give us exponentially so much more in return. St. Hermann, pray for us, that we may grow in thankfulness of spirit, glorifying God with our lives and rendering to God “a sacrifice of praise.”

Fr. Robert Miclean