October 8, 2017

18th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

 The Apostle and Evangelist John tells us, very simply, that “God is love.” We take this as an article of faith, but sometimes it is good for us to be reminded of how deep, how limitless, that love is. Our gospel today gives us that opportunity, for in the story of the widow of Nain we see that side of Christ which demonstrates his boundless compassion.

We are Orthodox Christians, and we know that our entire life is directed at matters of faith. We are members of the church of Christ, and we have unimaginable riches, great sacraments that literally allow us to meet God face to face. We commune the Body and Blood, we stand before God and confess our sins and receive absolution, we are married in the sight and presence of God. Every time we receive a sacrament, we receive God himself. Our whole life is devoted to growing in faith, growing in purity, growing in holiness, becoming ever more obedient to God. Faith is the bedrock of our communion.

Our faith is what carries us toward God. God’s love is what brings him to meet us. God is never blind to our suffering, or to our deepest needs. But there is another dimension to this, a vitally important one that speaks to us in a somewhat different way. The Church Fathers see in the figure of the sorrowing widow a representation of the Church itself.

We – the Church – pray in faith and in love for each other. We lament for our own sins, we grieve for those around us, we beseech the Lord for mercy, for each and every one of us. And God responds. He hears our prayers. He raises us from spiritual death, and after physical death, he rescues us from the grave.

Never let anyone tell you that prayer is futile. Never let yourself be persuaded that your heartfelt prayers fall on deaf ears. We may not always recognize the answers to our prayer. We may even conclude that God is not answering our prayers. But be assured, prayer is always answered by our loving and compassionate God.

At times, like the prodigal son, people may themselves delay the fulfillment of prayer, but God is always ready to meet us, and heal us. He does not promise us fame or wealth or everlasting good health, or worldly happiness and success. But in his love, He promises peace for our spirit, and love for our soul.

Similarly, never let anyone tell you that prayer for those who have passed on is meaningless. People who tell you that, usually in ignorance, are really committing a terrible slander on the Lord. Does love stop at the grave? Do you no longer love those who have been important in your life – mother or father, wife or husband, son or daughter, brother or sister, friend or companion – simply because they have passed from this life? Our love never stops, and if that is true for us, how much more is it true for God himself? That is why we pray and give alms, and do works in remembrance of those who have passed, and God responds, in compassion and in love, in ways that we cannot fully understand. St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco spoke passionately of this in a homily of his own, saying:

Relative and dear friends of the departed! Do what is needful for them and what lies in your power…(give alms) helping the poor, in memory of your close ones who have fallen asleep, and on churches, where prayers are offered on their behalf. Show mercy to those who have fallen asleep; attend to the good of their soul. That path awaits all of us….Let us be merciful to the departed.

The story of the widow of Nain is a wonderful story. It reminds us that the Gospel, like the Christian life itself, is seamless and perfect. The demands made on us are no less than the demands of love and of faith. As the Apostle John said, God is indeed love. And He responds to us, to the Church, as we in faith and in love cry out to him. For ourselves, for each other. For the living; for the dead; for the entire world. We cry out for mercy and for love and always – always – God responds. It is for this – faith and love – that we will be held accountable at the dread judgment seat. Nothing else. Not buildings, not numbers, not visible success. Faith and love. This is our life in the Church, it is our life in Christ.