

My Beloved Ones,

On this Third Sunday of Lent, the Gospel presents a serious challenge to all of Christ's disciples, past and present. *"And He called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Mark 8:34).*

The Christian understanding of suffering is difficult for many to grasp, because it is instinctual for humans to try to avoid pain and hardship, as a means of staying alive on this earth. Christ himself understood this part of our fallen nature when He continued by saying, *"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).*

Considering this alternative in light of the promise of eternal life, He explains, *"For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mark 8:36).* Our comfort and peace in this world are nothing compared to the eternal life which we have been offered.

When we contemplate our Lord's commandment, it is natural to feel sorrowful, yet we are also meant to be yet inspired. Bishop Theophan the Recluse gives the Christian this simple and beautiful explanation, *"The Golgotha of [our] cross is our heart: it is being lifted or implanted through a zealous determination to live according to the Spirit of God. Just as salvation of the world is by the Cross of God, so our salvation is by our crucifixion on our own cross."*

We live out our Lord's commandments in the hopes of achieving theosis. This is our true purpose on this earth: to become both like God, and in doing so, to achieve reunification with him. We should meditate closely on how we might mimic Christ's humility and sacrifice. For our Creator, who gives us earthly life, gave His own life to grant us eternal life. In this light, it makes perfect sense when the Lord of All asks, *"For what can a man give in return for his life?" (Mark 8:37)* Truly, there is nothing we could give, beyond "a broken and contrite heart" which can compare to all the blessings He has bestowed upon us.

Faced with the painful reality of our Lord's Crucifixion, and with His command to follow Him, even unto death, we should instead gladly lift up our own Cross, so that we can fulfill our true purpose on this earth. As long as suffering and sin continue to be unfortunate aspects of this fallen creation, let us take comfort that, with the coming of Jesus Christ, we are now able to turn our crosses into means by which we can grow closer to our Creator.

**+ALEXIOS**

Metropolitan of Atlanta

