

Homily for the first Sunday after Pentecost

By Fr Dcn Filip

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today on the first Sunday following Pentecost, we commemorate all the Saints.

Who are these saints? First of all they followed the example of Christ. They fulfilled God's commandment of love of God and neighbour, regardless of the time they lived in and of their circumstances.

For a lot of them lived in very difficult and dangerous times, not just in worldly terms, but also in spiritual terms. But they went on regardless, they struggled and reached heaven where they are now in triumph.

They were martyrs, confessors, ascetics, fools for Christ, educated people, simple people, rich people, poor people, bishops, monastics, lay people.

Let us not forget that our Church is the Heavenly Church. She is all-embracing, and she is filled up by the earthly, Militant Church. There is room for all of us there.

This is what today's reading of the Apostles is telling us:

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, Who, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2).

This should be like an anthem for us Orthodox Christians.

Also, the saints are all described at the end of the Gospel reading. Every righteous one who has ever lived, who has ever pleased God, who has ever struggled with his sins, who has ever truly believed in the resurrection is described today, because our Lord says:

"Everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children or lands for My Name's sake, shall receive a hundred fold and shall inherit ever-lasting life. But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

This is the description of the life that pleases God, the life that we are called to. We are to forsake the things which pull us down. We must forsake the sins which easily beset us.

And if our parents, brothers or sisters pull us down, or keep us from the Kingdom of God, we need to let go.

Jesus Christ is not telling us to just leave our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. Indeed we must love them, and honour them, whether they honour God or not. But here it concerns a value judgement, a set of priorities. The priorities we need to live by to attain the Kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel reading sets out a path on how to live, and, how not to live. The promise is there, and it also contains, in very clear terms, for all who have ears to hear and eyes to see, what happens when man does not follow Christ.

A Saint is someone who lives according to what he says he believes: believing the Gospel, believing what Jesus Christ taught.

To be a Saint, which means to be holy, is to labour with faith, with desire, with the right priorities, and with courage. The Lord defines for us, in this reading about the Cross, what a Saint is, both in a positive way, and in a negative way, what he should do and what a person should not do. Christ our Lord says,

“Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess before my Father which is in heaven.”

This is a fundamental characteristic of righteousness, to confess the Lord Jesus Christ. Here, the Evangelist Matthew uses the word “confess” as meaning to be a witness to, for and on behalf of God. It should not be confused with meaning confession with a priest.

And how do we confess Him or how are we a witness to God? Not with our lips, but with our actions; with our priorities and with our way of dealing with people; by making sure that what we say and what we do is important.

We confess the Lord by showing that we care about Orthodox Christian beliefs, that we live our life in a moral way. The world is in a terrible state. One would start dreading turning on the news, or reading a newspaper. But that does not mean we should just go along with all that happens.

We must have the courage to stand against what is happening, we must stand against every form of immorality and vice. This is the confession of Christ.

But, unfortunately many Christians only confess Christ with their lips. There is no action, no morality, they do not live and order their lives according to the Gospels.

Faith without works is dead. Because, if you do not live according to what you say you believe, then you are not confessing Christ. We have been given everything we need to confess Him.

We have been given the Holy Spirit, the comforter, who lives within us if indeed we make a place for Him, if indeed we clean out our soul, and garnish it and sweep it out with effort and desire. And He will help us in all things. But if we do not live righteously we are not confessing Christ.

Christ says He will confess us before His Father, if we live according to His will, and confess Him in this life. But only if we live according to what we say we believe.

For those people who do not live in such a way are reserved the words, "I don't know you. I don't know who you are. You have no part with Me. You haven't become like Me. Go away. Go unto outer darkness." Those words are reserved for those people who confess with their lips but not with the way they live, those who have their priorities wrong.

Now there are other practical things. In our modern society we are constantly in social situations. Are you afraid to make the sign of the cross before you have your dinner in a restaurant? If this is the case, you should weep and lament and pound your breast and ask God's forgiveness for this, and do it the next time. Are you afraid among your friends or among your work colleagues or whomever else you come across in your daily walk of life to show your priorities and the Christian way of thinking, or do you change your priorities based upon the vicissitudes of your life, maybe so you are not in trouble, or so nobody thinks badly of you, or maybe just so that you are not inconvenienced? This is not confessing Christ, either.

This week, Father Chrysostom, Father Deacon Alexander and his son, Diaconissa Annemieke, Subdeacon David, Phoebe Kearns, Michael Ambrose, and myself, attended the Archdiocesan Conference in Swanwick (Derbyshire).

The theme of the conference this year was "Nurturing the Parish Community".

The general consensus was that our communities should be much more visible. By this I mean that we should not be afraid of witnessing Christ, of confessing Him who gave all for us.

We need to be seen. We need to be seen as Orthodox Christians. And not just in Church or at home amongst Orthodox friends and family. We need to stand up for what we believe. The days of the Roman persecutions are over. We do not need to witness and confess in hiding anymore.

It is not acceptable to lead a double life when claiming to be an Orthodox Christian. Some might think that this is the right balance. They lead one life as an Orthodox Christian when they are in Church, and lead another life in the secular world, where they try to blend in and feel accepted by a society which is frankly amoral and vicious. Integrating in the society you live in is very recommendable, but our Christian values should not be sacrificed. How can we face God when living such a double life?

We must confess Christ before men. We must not live our lives according to the priorities of the world. Let us not be fooled by our passions and our desires to lead worldly lives. Let us follow the commandments of God instead. We have this cloud of witnesses, all the saints. Let us look at what they did. Through faith they subdued kingdoms, they wrought righteousness, they obtained promises, they stopped the mouths of lions, they were

tortured and killed; they wandered about in sheep skins and in goat skins. The world was not even worthy of them. They struggled for their faith. They faced very difficult trials. The Christian life is indeed a trial, a difficulty, it is an arena; it is a life-or-death struggle.

Let us thank the Lord even for this cross! Without it we cannot be saved. And the Lord wants all of us to be saved, and He wants us to be united into one Triumph with all the Saints, whom we are glorifying today.

Amen!