

Spiritual meaning of the Gospels read on the feast of St. Peter and Paul.

John 21:15-25, love, and restoration

Matthew 16:13-19, and the continual revelation of Jesus Christ in the soul

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... I thought maybe I'd say a little something about the feast of Peter and Paul, which of course just passed. Did you know that Peter and Paul both died on June 29? Some sources say that Peter was crucified, and a year later, on the same day, Paul was also killed. Some say that they were killed on the same day and year. So, on June 29, which on Joe's Garage Calendar is July 12, we are celebrating the new birth of Peter and Paul into the heavens.

I want to talk a little bit about the Scripture that is read for the feast. Since this is a great feast, in Vespers there are three parables read, and they were all from the writings of St. Peter. Then, during Matins there is a gospel reading, and of course Divine Liturgy will have a Gospel reading and the selection from the Epistle to the Corinthians, therefore, the writings of Peter and Paul are both represented. Of course, there is nothing in the gospel itself that refers to St. Paul. He was not a follower of Christ then.

John 21:15-25, love, and restoration

The Gospel for Matins is the same as the 11th Resurrectional Gospel, from St. John. It contains the dialogue between Jesus and Peter after they had caught the fish, and came back to land and were sitting by the fire. They had breakfast and then Jesus had a wonderful dialogue with Peter.

Three times He asked him if he loved Him. The first time he said: "Simon, son of Jonah lovest thou me more than these?" The word he used was "agape" – which means He was asking him: "Do you love me as I love you as God loves?" By referring to the disciples around him, our Lord was also teaching that we must love God above all things, even our friends. He was asking: "Do you love Me completely and totally and perfectly - and exclusively?".

Only a few days before Peter had denied the Lord, and although the Lord had gone to see him alone on the day of the resurrection, Peter probably still wasn't very feeling very secure. He felt great grief and guilt and unworthiness. We have a wonderful sessional hymn that we sing from the Octoechos (5th tone) during Sunday matins where Peter is questioning if the Lord would just make him again a fisher of the deep because of his unworthiness.

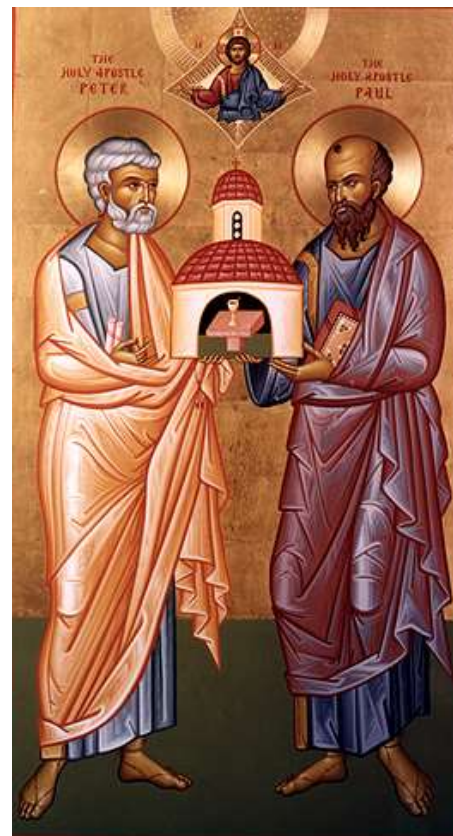
O Lord, after Thy resurrection on the third day /

and the worship of the apostles, /

Peter cried out to Thee: /

"The women showed courage, but I was afraid. /

The thief uttered theology, but I denied Thee. /



And dost Thou now call upon me to be Thine apostle still? /

Or wilt Thou show me again to be a fisher of the deep? //

Yet do thou accept me, who repent, O God, and save me!"

I always love to hear that hymn. It reminds me that I often have doubts about my abilities and wonder if my unworthiness will make me completely incapable of doing anything good for the Lord. Of course, it's dramatic, and we are just putting, as it were, words in Peter's mouth. But certainly, he was likely thinking that he was unworthy and perhaps would no longer be an Apostle. That would be a natural thing to feel. Even though Peter was excited when the catch of fish occurred, and he knew it was the Lord, and he swam the Lord quickly, there must've been something inside him that was not sure if he would be worthy of the ministry, because of his history.

Therefore, after this question, Peter answered by saying "Yea, Lord thou knowest that I have affection for Thee". He was afraid to use the word "agape", because he didn't feel worthy of using it. He didn't have confidence that he would be able to serve the Lord in a worthy way, so he, with a bit of cowardice, just said "I have affection for Thee". Note also that Peter acknowledges that the Lord knows all things, when he said "Lord, Thou knowest". Of course, the Lord knows all things, and we know that He knows all things, but we are weak human beings, and sometimes we need encouragement and support. The Lord was endeavoring to give Peter this encouragement and support, but as is always the case with the teaching of the Lord, he was also giving him much more - He was teaching him how he should love God, and that this love will be the power behind his ministry.

It is good to have affection for others, and this word denotes deep affection and commitment to someone, but not as deep as the affection and commitment that a person would have if he loves like God loves. Jesus ignored that answer and did not rebuke Peter, and instead He showed his confidence in Peter by telling him to "Be feeding my little lambs". The proper tense of this verb is continuous. That's a very important theological point. We do not do virtue for a little while, and then take a rest; it is a continuous action. Of course, that can be exhausting, but with God all things are possible. Indeed, Peter went on to be feeding many little lambs, and we are little lambs that are still feeding from his teaching, and his apostolic grace.

Then Jesus again asked: "Simon son of Jonah lovest thou Me? He used the same word for love as He did the first time. He did not add to his question as He did in the first question: "more than these". Perhaps this is because He wanted Peter to completely focus on the word "love". If we love God perfectly, it is certain that we will love Him more than anyone else. Therefore, the Lord ask a shortened question, so Peter could focus on it better. Perhaps something was stirring in Peter's soul, maybe a little bit of confidence, maybe a feeling that the Lord would completely accept him back, but he was not yet courageous enough to use the same word, so he again said "Yeah, Lord thou knowest that I have affection for Thee". This time the Lord answered him and said: "be feeding my sheep".

So far in this conversation, the Lord has taught Peter that He must love him completely, and learn to love as God loves. Peter knows this, but does not have enough courage yet. Therefore, the Lord is also showing his confidence in Peter by telling him to be feeding His little lambs, and His sheep. Gaining confidence is a process. It is rare that we can be dejected and then immediately full of confidence. Our Lord's healing of Peter is no different.

The last time that Jesus asked Peter, He changed the word to be the same as the one that Peter used. He said to him: "Simon, son of Jonah, hast thou affection for me?". Peter's response was one of grief, and probably some perplexity and confusion. St. John explains: "Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'hast thou affection for me?'". Peter must have been very close to being able to say that he loved God completely, but he was unable, and he again said: "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I have affection for Thee".

The Lord then went on to tell Peter to feed His lambs for the third time, and also how he would die, and indeed he did die in this way. Tradition tells us that he was crucified upside down at his own request. This special audience with Peter in the midst of the other disciples that were fishing with him healed Peter of his uncertainty and his grief. It made him capable of believing that indeed the Lord wanted him to serve as an apostle, and opened his heart up to the power that God would give him in order to serve as one of those whose “sound went forth over all of the earth”.

This dialogue teaches us that even after we have a great fall, if there is repentance, the Lord will receive us back, and even continue to entrust us with the work that He wants us to do. But we must also be like Peter, who at the end of his life, insisted that he be crucified upside down because he did not feel that he was worthy to be crucified as his Lord was crucified.

I am sure that to the end of his days Peter remembered his great sin of denial of the Lord, but with this memory he also remembered the Lord’s restoration of him. We should not forget our former sins, but we should not let them weigh us down. Peter’s sin did not weigh him down, because the Lord restored him. We should also look for this restoration from the Lord. It will not come from sitting at a campfire and talking to him, but it will come through our prayer, as we are giving drops of blood to the Lord with our words, and through our struggles, and by occasional significant visitations of grace where the Lord makes us aware of his presence. These visitations of grace will especially occur when we partake of the Holy Mysteries.

A Christian should be seeking this restoration constantly. Whenever you read the Holy Scriptures, especially the Gospels and the Psalms, you should be seeking healing. Whenever you attend the Divine liturgy and partake of holy Communion, your only purpose should be to meet God, and for Him to enlighten some dark part of your soul.

Matthew 16:13-19, and the continual revelation of Jesus Christ in the soul

The gospel that is read during the liturgy is from St. Matthew 16:13-19. It includes Simon Peter’s answer to the question of the Lord to his disciples: “but ye, whom do ye say that I am?”. Many were very confused about the Lord Jesus Christ. They thought him to be a prophet, or a reincarnation of John the Baptist or perhaps Elias or someone else. They were thinking in a carnal way. The Lord wanted them to think in a spiritual way. Peter gave a spiritual answer: “thou art the Christ, the son of God, the living one”.

The Lord was very pleased with this answer and said to Peter something that must be understood in a spiritual way. He said to him: “Happy art thou Simon Barjona; for flesh and blood did not reveal this to thee, but My Father Who is in the heavens. And I say also to thee that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against her”.

The nickname that the Lord gave to Simon means rock – Greek “Petros”. We are not capable of believing that Jesus is the Christ, the God man, the One who is fully God and fully man – without the Holy Spirit teaching us. This is a continual revelation. It is not just a one-time revelation. All of Christian ministry depends on this revelation. That is why the Lord said that “upon this rock”, that is upon the confession that Jesus Christ is “the son of God, the living one”, He would “build his church”. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is continually revealing to us concerning Jesus Christ. There is no limit to this revelation. It is not just the fact that we are to believe. It is an ongoing revelation and a reality that continually shapes us and changes us. This is why the Lord said that flesh and blood did not reveal this dogma to Peter. And to this day, flesh and blood does not reveal this dogma to us, although we might teach this dogma in a catechetical class. Only God can reveal the depth of this dogma to us, and enable us to live according to its power. Of course, we must cooperate with the grace of God to live according to its power.

The Roman Catholics have ascribed a heretical meaning to our Lord’s words, in trying to claim that the Pope of Rome is the sole Christian in authority over all other Christians. This is because they look at this verse in a carnal way and not spiritually.

All of us must build upon the rock of Peter's confession. We are nothing if we do not continually become changed, and purified, and enlightened by the continuing revelation of who Jesus Christ is.

Throughout Christian history, terrible things have happened Christians: persecutions and even the lapsing of vast parts of the church into heresy. In our personal lives there are times of great temptation, and even doubt. If we are continually striving to have the revelation of who Jesus Christ is occurring in us, there is no temptation that we will not be able to bear. Whenever we have doubts, or when we fall into laziness, and as St. John Chrysostom prays against in one of the evening prayers, "stony insensibility", we should know that it is always because we are not being changed by the revelation of this dogma in our hearts.

There is nothing whatsoever passive about Christianity. It is active, and it is always work. It is always the Christian responding to the grace of God, in passing from one labor to the next. When we stop laboring, we are like the paddler of a kayak, who stops paddling when he is going upstream. Immediately, the current takes him backwards, and perhaps even into the brush or into a fallen tree that is in the river. We cannot stop paddling. Perhaps because of human weakness, we must paddler little bit slower, but we will must not completely stop. The strength to keep paddling, even at a reduced intensity, comes from us continually being changed by the revelation of Jesus Christ in our heart. If we continue to paddle even when we are in a weakened state, we will understand the Lord's words, and his promise to Peter and to all Christians regarding the church: "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against her".

It is because of this continual revelation of Jesus Christ to the church that the presbyters are empowered with a charism to be able to pronounce absolution in confession, which the Lord tells Peter next: "and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall have been bound in the heavens, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall have been loosed in the heavens". This promise of the Lord is controversy a to those who do not understand the church. The key to understanding our Lord promises to Peter is to be continually growing in the revelation of Jesus Christ, which comes through His body, the church.

Through the prayers of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, may the Lord God help us and save us. Amen.

Editor's note: This written homily is excerpted from a letter to a prisoner, accessible below:

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