

## Good Friday 2012: The Gift of Free Will

*At that time, Jesus [said to Peter], “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times. [After the betrayal, those who stood by said to Simon Peter], “You are not also one of His disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not!” One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of him whose ear Peter cut off, said, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?” Peter then denied again; and immediately a rooster crowed.*

~ John 13:36-38, 18:15-17, 25-27

Beloved in the Lord,

Together with St. Paul, St. Peter is known as “the Prince of the Apostles”. His two letters in the New Testament and his leadership role in the Early Church (founding various church communities throughout the world) are just some of the things that have made him a figure that is celebrated in the Christian world. Yet, even St. Peter the Apostle would admit to “missing the mark” when it came to the first Good Friday.

Throughout the world, Orthodox Christians are a little more sombre today. Our hearts and minds turn to the Crucified One – He who died so we may live eternally. The Creator suffers the ultimate humiliation, the extreme humility, at the hands of His creation: He dies on the Cross after enduring spittings, buffetings, scourging, a crown of thorns. Yet, in the ultimate act of forbearance and divine forgiveness, He cries out to the Father: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Lk. 23:34)

As Orthodox Christians, we should know why **Christ** was present on that day at Golgotha. At the Fall of Adam and Eve, death was the sentence for sin to all of humanity. Christ took upon Himself this sentence when He died on the Cross. There was one difference between Him and the rest of humanity: He was without sin and thus undeserving of death. Christ paid the debt for sin that humanity could never pay. He died in place of us, so we could go “from death to life and from the earth to heaven.” Christ was born in a cave, lived His life and suffered on Golgotha for us to achieve sainthood or holiness (for, as St. Athanasios says, “*God became man so man can become god [or holy].*”

Although Christ gave us the great gift of freedom from corruption and death, humanity still has a choice – the choice between **theosis/holiness** and **sin**. This choice exists because humanity still has another gift from God (a gift that will be with us until we shut our eyes on this earth): **free will**.

As we look upon the Cross of Christ, we should ask how we use our free will. As we approach the Cross of Christ here at St. Demetrios, but as we live our personal Golgotha in life, we must ask: “who are we at Golgotha?” The cast of characters are all too familiar in our lives.

We know **Judas Iscariot** betraying his Master for thirty pieces of silver. The **greed** he showed throughout his life was the guiding force for him to betray the One he believed to be the Messiah. Money was more important than salvation. In our society, greed has taken on new

heights, with people invested more in stocks, bonds and lotteries than their families (not to mention the Church). We hear of countries going bankrupt because of funds not used appropriately. We know of money ruining marriages and friendships, expanding the already-great gap between the materially “rich” and “poor”. Due to his love of money, Judas Iscariot hung himself. *Greed is not good.*

We know of the **Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes** plotting against Christ since the beginning of His ministry because He brought the Good News to the world – and it wasn’t what they preached. **Hatred and jealousy** was seen throughout the centuries, where Christians were put to death because of their faith (be it the first or twenty-first century). We see it with people who claim to be “religious”, but they are there judging others. It is seen through racism, where people believe they are better than others simply because of the background they come from. When we don’t take the time to understand each other, hatred and jealousy seems like the easier option. Hatred and jealousy are in no way consistent with God’s will, which is perfect love to all.

Some have the emotion of **indifference**, as was shown by those who walked by the Cross of Christ and said, “*Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it again in three days! Save Yourself!*” They saw Him, mocked Him and walked away. We do this when we see people in need – hungry, thirsty, in pain – and simply walk away. Worse, when we are indifferent to Christ during the year and “remember Him” when the high holidays come up. Christ loves us always, not merely on these days. He worked miracles for them before, but they forgot about all the miracles when they put Him on trial. Indifference in faith just makes things worse – just go to Revelation to find out what Christ says about lukewarm faith.

The **disciples** (except Judas and John) showed **fear** when their Master was betrayed. They all ran away – and in the case of St. Peter, denied Christ. Fear is something that many people show, in one way or another, when it comes to faith. Crossing oneself when passing a Church or in a restaurant is a simple thing that many people don’t do because of a fear of being judged. Others fear of standing up for what we believe in because it might not be popular in today’s day and age. Yet, Christ tells us that “they persecuted Me, they will persecute you.” We should not show fear but should be proud of our faith and stand up for it in the face of error and sin.

Finally, there are people that show **bravery, honesty and holiness** as did **the Theotokos, St. John the Theologian** (the only disciple by the Cross of Christ), **Sts. Joseph of Arimathea, Nikodemos and the Myrrh-bearing Women**. They were not afraid to show their faith, even in the face of danger. In the Early Church, we have so many Christians that died by the hands of the authorities because they did not deny Christ. There was no need to tell them that it was no longer they who lived, but Christ who lived in them. These people face the struggle struggle every day with sin and holiness – but they also know *they are here to glorify God (and He in turn will glorify them)*.

Divine forgiveness was not limited to those in the First Century Church or those present at Golgotha. It extends to all human beings, “from the beginning to the end of time.” Yet, to be forgiven, one must ask for forgiveness. We have the choice to “change our mind” (to repent) as the thief on the right side of Christ did on the cross. We can repent and come closer to Christ,

taking steps towards divine mercy and eternal life, or we can choose to stay away from Christ (as the thief did on the left of Christ's cross).

This Good Friday, His gift is divine forgiveness and the ultimate sacrifice. Everyone has to ask themselves: *Why am I here? For the world, because it says "Good Friday" on our calendar? Or, am I here because "nothing can separate me from the love of Christ"?*

In the end, following the words of St. Peter would be best:

... Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former passions, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Ptr. 1:13-16)

Free will is a gift. May we use it to not be simply "good people", but holy by grace.

Καλή Ανάσταση. A blessed feast to all!