

## THE JOY OF THE CROSS

As we move beyond the half-way point of the great fast, the Church has us stop to consider, has us stop to venerate the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has never understood our relationship with the Cross...Even in the Apostle Paul's time he tells us "**the Cross** is foolishness to those who perishing; but unto us who are being saved, it is **the power of God**," (1 Cor.1:18).

It's is a reasonable question however. How can something the world sees as an instrument of torture, punishment and death be to us the very power of God? To fully understand this we need to see what the Cross is to the one who gave it meaning – we need to see and understand what it means to Christ. Paul again says in Hebrews (that we've been reading in the services all month on the weekends), that "Christ is "...the author and finisher of our faith, **who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross**," (Heb.12:2).

We have to again ask, how could being tortured, humiliated and murdered be a joy? Well, St. John Chrysostom and many other Fathers tell us that to Christ the Cross was joy because it was *doing the will of God His Father*. Because no matter what it was he had to do (even dying on the Cross), if it was the will of God – it was a joy.

This is a mystery to non-Orthodox and Orthodox who cannot understand how accepting a painful death could be joyful. And the reason we can't understand it is because we are looking at the wrong thing – we're coming at it from the wrong direction. All we see is the choosing of pain and death. But in reality, what is clouding our vision even more than our understandable fear of getting too close to the pain and death, is the *choosing*. And not what it is we choose but *the choosing itself*.

We today, particularly here in America, are infected with choice. Please understand, I'm not talking about the God-given freedom to choose but the mental, psychological, emotional *process of* choosing. We are paralyzed by the complexity of options before us and horrified by the thought of not having the freedom to choose. But if we don't have choice, we're not free – right? Yes, that is true, but it's only half the truth – and the

greater, more important half is rarely if ever spoken outside the Church - and all too often not spoken there as well.

The reality is that this mental, psychological and emotional process of choice that we as a culture hold above all else, is not from God. Choice is an aspect and product of this fallen world. Choice is what got us into this world in the first place! And not just the wrong choice – but choice itself. The process of not just freedom but freedom from being constrained by everything and anything other than me. Freedom from the will of anyone else but me. One of the great misconceptions we clergy as well as lay men and women have that few monks and nuns struggle with is this false and ungodly idea of freedom being choice. We believe freedom is a product of our choice to follow God. Brothers and sisters this is not now, nor has it ever been, true. Freedom is not found in *choice, in the ability* to follow God.

Real freedom is found – and only found – *in* God.

But if you're like me, you're probably thinking: if I don't find God by choosing Him, through this mental, psychological and emotional process, how do I find Him then?

We find God in repentance.

Repentance is not a choice, it is a response. It is a response to the grace of God. It is the door of faith, the connection and the path to His love – not a choice. Jesus didn't choose just as Adam and Eve were not to *supposed* to choose. They tragically failed to do what He wonderfully did: respond to the will of God.

In this Lenten world and in this Lenten life that response is repentance. And in repentance we find faith and we find love and we have a life with God where choice is unnecessary because in His love we have joy without measure and without end – regardless of what we do in this state of joy. In God, in His will, even the Cross is a joy! This joy reveals the *satisfaction* our *choices* bring to be vanity and vapor.

We don't choose to love God, we repent, and in our repentance we find faith, we find Him, we find love, and we stay *with* Him and *in* Him. Where choice is eternally unnecessary.