

Witnessing the Birth of Faith

I would like to share with you the story of a young person who was baptized on Holy Saturday morning. I have baptized infants, children between the ages of 4-10, young adults and adults but have never baptized an 18-year-old teenager. A person cannot describe the magnitude of another person's conversion. Each conversion is deeply personal and a mystery in the deepest sense of the word. God has destined us all for life in Him, however, for those not born into faith they have the challenge of freely responding to God's call to faith. Conversions remind us that God is personally involved in our daily lives and can call a person out of any circumstances that may exist and lead them into very green pastures. At times there is a disconnect between what seems to be taking place in Church with our personal experience of God, yet on this day the two came together in a unique fashion.

After a person responds to God's invitation to share in His life, they make a break with a life in sin. Before entering the waters of baptism, the candidate is asked to formally renounce Satan and accept Christ. On Holy Saturday, when the young woman was asked to renounce Satan she responded, "I do renounce him!" The power of her conviction shook us all. It was definite and powerful because she meant it with all her heart. She knew that Christ had called her into new life. This renunciation took place on the most sacred of Sabbaths and here was the greatest of miracles happening before our eyes, the rebirth of a sinner. There were no Pharisees to question Christ's authority to heal on the Sabbath but indeed the fulfillment of Christ's ministry became manifest before our eyes. The rest of the service that followed was like being in the delivery room with an expectant mother as she gives birth to her child.

What made this miracle special was the context in which it took place. Holy Saturday morning is a celebration of the Sabbath day's rest of the Lord, Jesus Christ in the tomb. As soon as Christ had given his life on the cross, He was at work in Hades resurrecting the dead and preaching liberation to those trapped in hell. "Today, Hades lets out a groan: 'My sovereignty is destroyed. I received Him as a mortal, one among the dead; but this One I am powerless to contain; instead with Him I lose all I had governed. I had held the dead for ages, but behold, He resurrects all.' Glory, Lord, to Your Cross and Your Resurrection. (Holy Saturday morning, hymn)." Christ's final act of healing and renewal would be the giving of eternal life to those held captive by sin and death. This was the context of making a break with sin and the joining of oneself to Christ through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. The early Christian knew this connection very well and understood every Pascha in terms of their personal rebirth in Christ and liberation from sin.

So great was the experience of renewal that the early Church practiced an elaborate Paschal vigil, that included the baptism of the catechumens. At sunset, the services would begin with Great Vespers, Matins and the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. Today we celebrate the paschal vigil in an abbreviated form on Holy Saturday morning.

Thematically the readings for morning are about Christ enduring death, conquering its power and bestowing life on all. While the vigil was going on, in a separate building the baptisms were taking place. As the faithful were reading the story of Jonah in the whale and the three children in the fire, simultaneously catechumens were experiencing birth in Christ. Three days in the belly of the whale describes a person being trapped and powerless by something greater than they are. The three children who were thrown into the fire after renouncing to worship of the idols and confessing their faith in the true God expresses that in the midst of tribulations Christ is present with us like the fourth person in the fire. Being in the fire is a place to celebrate and sing praises to God, blessing Him for his care, love and salvation, which are given through His death upon the cross.

The inconsistency between worship and life continues to be a problem for modern Orthodox Christians, baptized as infants. The whole purpose of Great Lent and Pascha is precisely to make worship relevant to our personal lives. The themes of renewal, rebirth and resurrection are abundant during the time from Pascha to Pentecost because this is precisely the promised fruit of the Lenten effort. This is a time for Orthodox Christians to examine their personal experience of resurrection in light of the resurrection of Christ. Are we still in the belly of the whale or have we found peace with Christ and even if thrown into a fire can we rejoice and be glad? Come, let us experience the joy of our own baptism and its power to resurrect and renew old faith with vitality, grace and dynamic creativity.

In Christ's Love,
Fr. Andrew