

Homily

Delivered by His Grace, Bishop TIKHON, Bishop of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania, on July 18, 2005, at the Divine Liturgy at the 14th All-American Council.

The Healing on the Sabbath (Romans 12:4-5, 15-21; Matthew 12:9-13)

And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: and behold there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?" that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, "What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days." Then saith he unto the man, "Stretch forth thine hand." And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. (Matthew 12:9-13)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We live today in a world of disunity and division, where our only hope of healing and unity lies in our Lord, God, and Jesus Christ. In the Gospel reading appointed for today, we have witnessed this hope in the physical healing of the man whose hand was withered.

This healing would have perhaps gone unnoticed were it not for a small contention on the part of the people assembled in the synagogue. This contention arose concerning the question of the Sabbath and whether or not it was lawful for Christ to heal someone on the day of rest.

The accusation brought against the Lord by this question reveals once again the disunity and division in the human race. Those who questioned the Lord knew the Law very well - they knew the commandment given in the book of Exodus: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gate (Exodus 20:8-10). The division is revealed not in the fact that they knew the Law, but in the fact that they had forgotten, or chose to ignore, that the Law itself was an imperfect substitute for something greater. And because they failed to see this, they could only look at the Lord and judge Him based on whether or not He was following the Law as they understood it.

But Christ, in a passage immediately before the one read in today's Gospel, had already proclaimed that the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath day, and in another place, He had reminded the people that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So what is truly remarkable is that by healing the man's arm and returning it to wholeness, our Lord is not only working a miracle for this one person, but is also revealing to all that He has truly come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. He has come not to conform to the Sabbath, but to be the True Sabbath.

We sing of this in the Holy Orthodox Church on Great and Holy Saturday, when we proclaim that "this is that blessed Sabbath" on which Christ "rested in the flesh," descending into hell and bestowing resurrection (eternal rest) on all held captive there. This Sabbath rest is the fulfillment of

the Old Testament Sabbath rest, but also of our salvation - a salvation which Christ worked not by power and might, not by decree and argument, but by humility. In His humility, He reveals His glory, and by this glory, He manifests his victory over death and corruption, the sources of our disunity and division.

We, too, live in a world much like the divided and fragmented world of the Old Testament. As his Grace, Bishop Seraphim, reminded us yesterday, perhaps things are, in fact, worse today. In our world, it seems as if everything has been polarized, and as individual Orthodox Christians, or as the Church, we are constantly confronted with the choices of a fragmented world. We are asked:

- Are we traditional or progressive?
- Are we conservative or liberal?
- Are we biblical fundamentalists or biblical higher critics?
- Are we for technology or against it?

The world wants us to choose just as the world repeatedly asked the Lord to choose: Are you for the Law or against it? Are you supporting the Temple or blaspheming it? Are you following the Sabbath or breaking it? But Christ did not choose one way as opposed to another. Rather, He revealed that He is the Way, and that if we truly desire to find the Way, we must follow Him.

Christ did not come out in favor of the Law or in opposition to it. Rather, He revealed Himself as the fulfillment of the Law and as the Way for us to attain that holiness and that virtue which will lead us to the likeness of Christ. He is truly that Rest into which we can enter by His grace.

As we gather here in Toronto for this 14th All-American Council, we know that we have choices to make, programs to implement, financial programs to debate, and so forth. But in the midst of all that, let us not allow ourselves to be caught up in the divisions and polarities that are the way of the world. Let us heed the words of the Apostle Paul: I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1-2).

If we want to be transformed, there is only one thing to do, and that is to follow Christ, to strive to acquire His perfection, to be granted His humility, and to be filled with His love. This should be the work of each and every one of us, and this should be the work of our Council, whose theme is: "Our Church and the Future." Our future can only be one thing: our salvation in Christ and the road that we take to get there. In the same way, Tradition is not simply that which is handed down, but the living of that which is handed down.

If we want unity on all levels of Church life, then we must begin by finding healing for our own hearts. We can find this healing through repentance and through prayer, through humility, and through love, and above all, by remembering that it is the grace of God which protects and preserves us at all times. May that grace be granted to us by the mercy and love of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom is due all glory, honor, and worship, together with His Father who is from everlasting, and the All-Holy Spirit, always, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.