

Letter to a prisoner.

Struggle, esp against unforgiveness, bitterness, lust and self-abuse.

Homilies on Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday.

4/4/2017 ns.

From: Priest Seraphim Holland PO 37, McKinney, TX 75070. April 4. 2017 ns

To:

Dear: I received your letter. I am late writing back, and hope this gets to you before you are shipped. I have email from ... that gives me details of your last visit, and I am very encouraged. I am shocked that I took so long to write back (date on your letter was 3-14!) . My goal is to do so in a week, but I obviously missed. By your prayers, I will do better.

BTW: ..., and my sinful self should be in your prayers. I sent you a letter about praying for others. I pray for you every day, and your family, which you have told me about.

I am changing my visits a little, and that should help you, if you remain in East Texas. I will go to Michael on Wed, then Powledge on Thu, twice a month. That gives me extra time on Wed to stay in the area and visit another prison. On days I do not go to another place, I will kayak on the Trinity River, or Lake Palestine.

St Paul talks about having “fought the good fight, and finished the course”. This must happen with all of us. I am not sure that the actual accomplishment of good and following the commandments is harder in prison. The emotional toll, loneliness, feelings of abandonment – these things are much harder than the world, but people are people, and very few struggle for virtue, no matter where they are. You must not be like those on the broad path, which leads to perdition. You have a long road ahead of you, but you are not alone, even though, emotionally, you may feel alone sometimes. and I are not going to abandon you, we pray for you every day. You will get visits, and if God blesses, regular visits. You must try to keep focused. Our life is but a vapor, the scripture tells us, and none of our suffering, loneliness, regrets – anything – will be remembered in the next life, where there is “no sickness, no sighing, but life everlasting”. You must cling to the “sure hope”, as the scriptures tells us. This will get you through many tough spots.

We cannot feel good unless we struggle to do good. This is a Christian truth. You saw the opposite of this truth when you did drugs. You did things that were wrong, to feel good for a little while, and then you felt really bad. The results of your lifestyle were disastrous, and have brought you much pain. Remember that **it is always wrong to do the wrong thing, and that it is always right to do the right thing.** God will always reward persistence and dedication and effort. This reward is not always, or even often instantaneous, like the “reward” of sinful pleasures, but it cannot be taken away, like sinful pleasures, which always rob us of our freedom and happiness.

I am plumb running out of time, and need to go to church to celebrate Presanctified Liturgy at 9am. I thought I would finish this letter in time, but I am up against the clock. I am sleeping a little too much – this is a “hiccup” in my life right now. If I got up at 5, when my alarm rang, I would have plenty of time, but I slept a little more, and only had time to say my preparation for communion prayers, and reread your letters, and start

writing. ...’s wonderful email spurred me on to decide to get a letter out to you today (I read it late last night), but even that idea did not get me up at 5am! I need your prayers, because I am losing time. Tomorrow, I must rise at 3am to go to two prisons, and these early morning are getting harder for me for some reason. I will complete this letter when I return home late this afternoon.

Ok, it is 1:26 pm, and I am back, but not wearing dark sunglasses. ... is seeing you every week, I think, and reports that you are doing well.

You are reading the prayer of St Ephrem. I would love to hear your thoughts on it – it gets into your bones, does it not? For every one of the 8 things – 4 sins and 4 virtues, I feel my inadequacy. I have not abandoned any of the sins fully, not adopted any of the virtues completely. However, I feel great hope in my heart when I say the prayer, because as I prostrate I feel God’s mercy. You have a prayer book he gave you. It is not the best one you could have, but it is serviceable, and you should use it till it falls apart.

... reports that you have forgiven That is huge. This will not be a permanent forgiveness unless you **WORK ON IT**. The demons will want you to remember wrongs and become embittered. This is a common affliction in prison, which can be an incubator for anger, bad thoughts and everything else contrary to eternal life, for those who do not actively struggle. You must keep these thoughts at bay by praying for Amanda every day, and always blaming yourself for everything.

There is very little in life that is unpleasant for us where we have no blame whatsoever. If there is anything, if we bear wrongs against us with meekness and humility, and not with anger, or revenge or even hatred, we are greatly blessed by God. This is the hardest thing – for everyone. It is easy to like those who treat us well. It is hard to love those who treat us poorly, but we are commanded to! These people are like “angels of mercy” to us, because if we love them and forgive them, God’s mercy will fill us completely. Here is what the Apostle Peter says about wrongs against us, in line with what I have just written:

“19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:19-21,NIV)

...

I am interested in your response to the first two catechetical letters I sent you. Please confirm you have received them, and give some thoughts. Our correspondence should be a conversation as much as we can manage it – a give and take, with thoughts and questions given and answered.

... tells me you are scheduled to get shipped (soon). Let us pray that you are in the East Texas area. Michael or Powledge would be ideal. Hughes would be okay. Anything in East Texas could be managed. West Texas would be a bummer, but God will help us in all things. I do not know any way to write to anyone to influence your assignment. Tell them you are Orthodox – **CHANGE YOUR CARD! (Eastern Orthodox) ASAP**, and that I am your pastor. We will do what we can, and let God’s will be done.

... tells me: “... told me tonight that he hopes that you will write him soon. He's struggling a lot: praying, fasting, seeking God, but also falling at times into the old ways of life that he wants to escape. I've encouraged him not to focus on the falls and the failures, but on the getting up and making a good beginning with God's help. I counseled him - and at the same time my sinful, arrogant self - to remember

always that, on his own, he has nothing and can do nothing, and to pray with a sense of real neediness and longing: Lord, help me! Lord, save me!”

This advice is all spot on. You must struggle, or you will lapse.

No drugs, no homemade hooch, and please, no K2! That stuff can make a man crazy.

And also, you must struggle against the flesh. By this I mean lust and all that entails. In prison, sexual gratification is treated like a basic human function, like taking a pee. It is not. Do not buy into the coarse way of life around you. The pictures are freely available, but you lose a little of yourself every time you look at them. Masturbation is a sin. It does not matter that it is a common occurrence in prison, and even spoken about by some, or even done openly without shame. It is an expression of lust, and it is a sin. It must be struggled against. This is a hard struggle, especially because you will be in an environment where it is so casually thought of, but you must struggle if you are to make progress in all of your thoughts. If you fall into this sin, you should do 50 prostrations, saying “God cleanse me a sinner”. Is that hard? Yes! Salvation is hard. Christianity is not for wimps. It is for those who struggle, because they know their purpose.

I need you to be frank and honest with me about your falls, within the limitations of semi-public letters, which, of course, can be read by strangers at any time. If God wills, we will see each other, and I expect nothing less than flagrant honesty from you.

I will send this letter to ... also, and please tell him if you received it when he sees you this coming Sunday. I am assuming that my letter, posted Tuesday, 4/4, will get to you by then. If it misses you, and your mail is not forwarded, as I expect it will not be, I will send it again. I will check the TDCJ to see where you are, and send the letter there, if I think you have not received it.

Ok, now a little to fill out the pages, from stuff I have written, and about the approaching Holy Week and Pascha (some call it “Easter, but I do not because I do not like to refer to my Lord’s resurrection by the name of a Babylonian fertility God!). Pascha, btw, means “Passover”, and Christ is our “Passover lamb”. He is the final “Passover”, or Pascha, because after His sacrifice and resurrection, there is no need for animal sacrifices, and there is a complete REMEDY for sin – not just forgiveness, but also the ability to become perfected. Lazarus Saturday is 4/7, followed the next day by Palm Sunday, then the days of Holy week, and Pascha on Sunday, April 15.

Lazarus Saturday - The Resurrection applies to us NOW.

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

Today we look toward the resurrection, and we look also set our eyes on the resurrection we will celebrate with great fervor and zeal and festivity in only another week. But today we look at our resurrection, very explicitly because Lazarus was a man like us and was dead and already decomposing, and our Lord raised him from the dead.

Imagine what he felt. He was in Hades, and he heard the voice of God, all the way in Hades, and He brought him back in an instant, in a flash. He knew the power of God, and those around saw that power, as Jesus, with a loud voice said, "Lazarus, come forth." And the same voice calls us -- the same voice calls us to come forth. The same voice says, "I am the resurrection. If you believe in Me you will have eternal life." We must believe. We must understand. We must also live according to the way Christ is, and then you will understand what it means to be a Christian.

Did you see the two ways that the sisters dealt with the death of their brother? One stayed still in the house, and one ran out to Jesus. They both believed, but their faith was weak, and they'd never heard of a man who was four days dead being raised from the dead.

They'd heard of a person who had died that day being raised from the dead. Christ had done it twice.¹ They knew of Saint Elias who had raised someone from the dead², and of the prophet Elisha³, but in both of those cases the man was dead one day.

Now a man had been dead four days, and it was beyond their understanding how he could be raised from the dead. They thought of a far-off time when there would be the resurrection of all things. They didn't think really of how it applied to then and now.

The resurrection applies to us now brothers and sisters. Not later -- now. It changes us now, makes us able to live now. It comforts us now. It burns away our passions and our sins now. "The kingdom of God is within you,"⁴ Christ said. The Resurrection and the Life lives within us now.

We must understand this. We must live this.

And we must approach Christ in these two ways that his beloved friends approached him. Mary sat still in the house: we must pray, we must develop within ourselves great love, great fervor, and unshakable belief. We must also be active in our faith. We must go to Christ. We must beg Him for the things we need. And we must live according to the way He has told us to live. He has told us, live within the ark of the church, to fast, to pray, to partake of all the things that the church has given us. This is the activity that Martha points to.

Both are necessary. Neither one is enough to save a soul. We must have fervent belief, and we must live within that belief.

Slightly more than seven days from now -- no, actually it will be Friday evening -- I will read a sermon of Saint Epiphanius⁵ in which he speaks of when Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, when down into Hades. We have a taste of that today. We should meditate very carefully, and think what it would be like to be in the depths of Hades, to be in the depths of hopelessness, to see our flesh and see how weak it is, and for God to say, "Come forth", and break everything that is holding us fast. A Christian must really understand this. This is what the resurrection means for us. It is how we reach our perfection.

It is very painful. It is painful for me, and I tell you, it might sound strange, but I hope and I pray that it is painful for you. I hope that you see the uselessness of so much in what we call this life, that you see the depravity, both in yourself and outside of yourself, and that you long to be made whole, to be made complete. A Christian must be like that. He must be like a stranger in a strange land, like Moses. He must consider himself to only be passing through on the way to the heavenly city, to Zion, to Jerusalem, to perfection.

This is what we are going after, you know. And we see that God can perfect. He didn't just raise Himself from the dead; He raised us from the dead. This must be understood. And it's not just something you read in a book and understand. It's not just a point of doctrine or a question to be answered. It's in the heart. If you

know that God raised you from the dead, you won't want to do anything but to become like Him, and you will know that you can become like Him. You have been promised that you can become like Him. This is the meaning of the resurrection.

This is why God raised Lazarus from the dead. To show us the power of the resurrection in us, because we're weak. He knows. We might say, "He did it, but he is God. So how does that apply to me?" Just like Mary and Martha, I know that some day we'll be raised from the dead in the resurrection, but they didn't apply it to their life now.

This is why Lazarus was raised from the dead. And it's also why Jesus waited. Not only so Lazarus would die. He certainly, as God, could have arranged that He was near the town, but He was far away from the town and after He was told about Lazarus, He went slowly to Bethany and took four days. He waited so that He could teach us something that is very important: that we must wait, we must be patient, we must have faith even when it appears that things are not as we would wish them to be, and when they don't change. Jesus Christ can take a man, stinking, from the grave, after four days, and raise him from the dead, He can raise us.

But don't believe in the resurrection later; believe in the resurrection now. Live in that belief. Try to change because of that belief. Believe that you can be changed. I don't care what it is that assails you. God can heal you. Not later, but now. Don't believe in the resurrection -- later. Believe in the resurrection and the life, Who is with us, now. We're about to partake of His holy body and blood for our sustenance, that medicine of immortality. Our immortality, you know, begins with our baptism. And we are just increasingly fulfilling it every day that we live. Live in the light of the resurrection. Believe it. Believe that you will change. And when you hear God's voice saying, "Come forth" at the resurrection, you will be filled with joy. May God help you. **READ John 11:1-45!**

This homily is at: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-week-06-saturday_2009+lazarus-saturday+the-resurrection-applies-to-us-now_john11-1-45.html

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Palm Sunday - *Learning Humility by Recounting the Events of Holy Week.* 2011

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, when we go through the events of the Gospel in our Services, we sing about them and then we read the text about them; and if you listen carefully you will not only learn the events and the theology, but you will learn humility because you'll see how often mistakes were made that, in retrospect for us, are very obvious, but they weren't obvious at the time.

Sometimes the mistakes were made by people who were good, like, for instance, Martha and Mary who said, Oh, Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died. The Fathers are quite clear about this: They didn't understand that He was God because God is everywhere. Sometimes the mistakes are made by those with evil intent such as, for instance, the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the ruling elite who plotted to have Christ murdered.

We have a reading today and much singing about it, about our Lord coming into Jerusalem on the colt, the foal of an ass. That's prophesied directly in Zachariah, and we read it today. The Jews knew this reading, and yet when all of the miracles occurred: People were raised from the dead and the blind being able to see and

the lame walking and the deaf able to hear and the mute speaking; and then a Man comes on the colt, the foal of an ass, and people cried Hosanna, meaning God saves, and they didn't see. They didn't understand, even though they knew the Scripture.

There is another Scripture that is even more startling in that the exact coinage, the exact amount of the transaction of Judas selling our Lord, betraying Him, is in Jeremiah: Thirty pieces of silver, exactly what they paid for Him, to Judas. And they didn't see that either. This should teach us something. They weren't stupid men. They were sinful, benighted men.

And even the ones who are not so much sinful and benighted -- I don't think we should call Mary and Martha sinful and benighted or our great Apostle Peter who denied the Lord three times, sinful and benighted -- just ignorant because it takes time to learn all things and to be filled in all ways with God. It's the same with us; this should teach us some humility. Because what would we have done in that situation? We wouldn't have understood either.

So if you look carefully at the Services -- Palm Sunday is a great example, all of Passion Week -- there are examples of people making mistakes because of not understanding, not quite getting it right. Sometimes, as I said, because they were evil, having evil intentions that clouded their thinking, and sometimes just because they just had not matured enough yet; they just had not learned enough. And let us hope that we are in that latter category; there's a lot we don't know, a lot of mistakes we make. Let's have some humility as we go through the Passion Week.

And let us, as I've told you before, personalize the Scriptures and listen to them as if we are there. I don't mean to make it some sort of passion play or drama. No, but just to consider that we are weak, and there are many things we don't know and many mistakes we make, many things we don't understand yet, things that we believe that are not correct, things we do that are not right, and we don't even know it yet.

Let's have some humility. That's what these Services and the Scriptures that surround them or that the Services are constructed around, I should say, rather, should teach us.

The blessing of the Lord be upon you through His grace and love for mankind always now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

This sermon is at: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-06_2011-04-17+learning-humility-by-recounting-the-events-of-holy-week.doc

AUDIO: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-06_2011-04-17+learning-humility-by-recounting-the-events-of-holy-week.mp3

The Inner Meaning of Palm Sunday. *Philippians 4:4-9 John 12:1-18* 2009

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, whenever you see a big event, there's something, an inner meaning to it that is not immediately obvious. Big things are understood by little things. Tangible things are understood by intangible things. The visible is apprehended by the invisible.

So this great event that occurred, our Lord entering Jerusalem, fulfilling so many prophecies, showing us His demeanor, His beauty, how we should live, telling us of the coming of the Gentiles. All of these things can only be understood if we have an inner life.

Most of the people who saw Him in the crowd only saw what was visible. They were excited because He had raised Lazarus. That was quite an event. Perhaps some had heard that He had made other people rise from the dead but not after four days. In that climate after four days the body would stink and would already be

decomposing.

So this was truly a marvelous thing. So, many came, as the Scripture says, just to see this. They didn't understand. That was not the meaning of this day.

Then they saw Him, what an incredible sight, a person seated on the colt, the foal of an ass walking in to Jerusalem, people throwing palm leaves down and their garments down and crying out, Hosanna in the highest. This is not the meaning of the day. Certainly, there are things, great deep theological things from our Lord's actions that can be understood but only if we understand the meaning of this day.

The epistle tells us the meaning of this day, right at the very beginning. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice." Then he defines what "rejoice" means. It doesn't mean crying "Hosanna in the highest" and throwing garments in the way and cutting down palm trees or palms. No. It has to do with being careful for nothing; in other words, don't care about things of the world. Care only about God.

"In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

And then what happens?

"The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

And this is also rejoicing in the Lord. He says, "Brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things." This is the meaning of this day.

Our Lord came to Jerusalem to fulfill a mission. And He fulfilled this mission. But it is not accomplished in every man, because not every man pays attention to the mission. Some see the spectacle of a Man on the colt, the foal of an ass. Some see the spectacle of someone who could raise a man four days dead. Others see the way to peace, the Way to purity, the only way to hope. The only way to understand this day is to live in the spirit of it.

Our Lord, the King of the ages, came to Jerusalem to be executed as a criminal, in order that He could teach us humility and the right way to live. He taught us and He accomplished for us the right way to live. As God, He showed us all things. As Man, He accomplished what He taught us so that we, as human beings, can accomplish what we have been taught. But we can only understand it if we apply ourselves to struggle to become good. It really is all about that. It's always about that.

I have a little saying you guys have heard, I think; I've written it down before: **It's always about morality, always.**

Our Lord coming into Jerusalem, it's about morality, not about the event, but about the inner meaning, showing us how meek He was, how holy, how ready to die for us He was, how much He loved us and how much we should love Him in return.

Christianity is morality. It's becoming better. I've told you many times, there's darkness in us, a lot of darkness. If you don't feel this darkness, then you are lost, because it's there. Jesus Christ came to bring light. Remember at the very beginning of His mission, it's said that He went into the land of Zebulun and Naphtali and went, a light to shine forth among the Gentiles. He came to bring light to us. He came to Jerusalem to bring light to us. He allowed Himself to be executed to bring light to us. He taught us those sublime words, the true meaning of the Ten Commandments in the Beatitudes, to bring light to us.

We cannot see this light unless we live in it. It's not about throwing palm leaves down on the ground. It's about giving Him our heart.

Every time I read these Scriptures for this day, I see this great contrast. So much of what the Lord did was not understood. Holiness was among them, and they were excited, and yet only a few days later they would say: Crucify Him, crucify Him, we have no king but Cesar. Why did they do such a foolish thing? How could they change so quickly? It wasn't that they changed quickly. It was that they never changed. They saw Christ as an event, as something interesting, something that could perhaps make them victorious over the Romans or heal their mother or their sister or their brother of some disease. But they didn't see what He taught them.

And to this day, we who bear the name Christian often do not see; let's be honest now. We don't rejoice in the Lord always. I'm not talking about the emotional feeling of happiness.

A lot of times in the Christian life, there's a lot of sadness inside. Let's rejoice because we're changing. Do you feel a change going on in you? I hope so. Because if you don't, this day means nothing, the Resurrection means nothing. It's nothing unless we change. It means nothing unless we become what we're not now. I hope none of you are satisfied with the kind of person you are now; you shouldn't be; it's not what you were born for. You were born for holiness, perfection, beauty. The only way to holiness, perfection, beauty is Jesus Christ. Not just to praise Him with branches, but to live as He lived in our life. That is the meaning of this day. May God help us to live according to it.

This homily is at: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-06_2009-04-12.doc

Palm Sunday – The Entry into Jerusalem.
Why did we read this epistle?
Principles of Scriptural exegesis . Philippians 4:4-9
2010

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, since today is Palm Sunday, the Gospel reading is about our Lord's entry into Jerusalem and some of the events that just preceded it when He was in Bethany with Lazarus and Martha and Mary. And of course yesterday was Lazarus Saturday so we read about the resurrection of Lazarus.

Generally when there is a feast day, the Scripture is about that commemoration; whether it is the Old Testament or the New, the Gospel or the epistle, the Scripture is about that event. Maybe it's about the history of the event, or maybe it's about the spiritual application of that event.

So you should ask yourselves, why is a particular Scripture read? It's pretty easy to know why the Gospel was read; it's about the entry into Jerusalem.

Why was the epistle read? The epistle doesn't have anything do with the entry into Jerusalem.

Perhaps you might think, Saint Paul says, "the Lord is at hand". One could say, He came into Jerusalem to show that He was at hand. This was the advent of our salvation, right? The beginning of His passion where He would die on the cross, resurrect, ascend into the Heavens, and send the Holy Spirit. So one could say the Lord is at hand, but I think that's a bit of a stretch because really that's not the major thrust of the reading.

I'll give you a principle of scriptural exegesis or two, actually. One is that *you always must think about when the Scripture is read* because the church understands the Scripture. Where it chooses to have Scriptures read is important. When is it read? What days is it read? And also, what Scriptures are read together? This is especially useful for the Old Testament. For instance, on Holy Saturday, many Scriptures that are read

together, they obviously have something to do with the resurrection. And some of them are obvious and some of them are not so obvious. And all of our feast days, when we have Scripture readings from the Old Testament, they bring out what the Old Testament was speaking about in a dark way, in a way that wasn't really easy to understand and still isn't unless you interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New. And of course the best interpreter of the Old Testament is the Church because we know what happened, so we look with hindsight and see what the Old Testament means.

Here is another principle of Scriptural exegesis. This is the most important one: *If you don't live it, you're never going to understand it.* That one absolutely is ironclad. *If you don't live the Gospel, you will never understand it.* Oh, you might be able to say some things about it. You might be able to have some sort of knowledge about Scripture, maybe know all the books or maybe know the doctrines that are spoken of in it, et cetera, et cetera, but never penetrate to the depth of what the Gospel is about, Because the Gospel is about man changing so that he becomes perfected because Jesus Christ came and made us capable of it and made it possible. That's what it's all about. Everything is about that.

And therefore, everything in the Gospel, everything in the epistles, everything in the Old Testament is about belief and morality, together, *because you can't have one without the other.*

So that's the most important principle of understanding the Scripture: Live it. If you don't live it, you will never understand it.

Now, Saint Paul says: Be careful about nothing, or, don't be anxious about anything. I kind of like the way it's said in the more archaic way:

“Be careful for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Then he goes on to say the moral application,

“Whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, pure, lovely, do these things and think on these things.”

This is the thrust; this is the meaning of this reading. It says, “The Lord is at hand,” but the *real important part is that we must live according to what we believe.* And it means even more than just this because it is in the context of Palm Sunday.

What's happening on Palm Sunday? The Lord was being acclaimed as a King. People were crying, ‘Hosanna in the highest’, throwing down their garments and palm branches and branches of trees and acclaiming Him to be God and also the majority of them were thinking now He is bringing in the Kingdom and there would be hegemony over Rome and after all this time of being under the Roman thumb they would be victorious and He would usher in the Kingdom. They had a false view of Him. They called Him king. They called Him God, but they didn't know what He was really coming for because they had their own ideas.

Really, our troubles in life can be traced to some very simple causes. *We have wrong ideas about things.* These wrong ideas include our sins and our passions also because they, I told you before, *sin makes you stupid.* If you sin, then your understanding is clouded. Always. Every time.

You know the illustration. You take still water and you shake it up; it becomes all turbid, you can't see. That's

what sin does, it makes everything unclear. You think it's clear but it's never clear, ever, if you sin. Wrong ideas and sins include bad priorities. So these people, most of the people in the crowd had a priority that He was going to usher in the kingdom and he was going to be their military leader. They were going to squash Rome and the Jews would be again the preeminent peoples of the world.

And here is another problem. They weren't patient. On Palm Sunday, they were all happy and were crying "Hosanna in the highest" but had later on it will come out they were not patient.

Only a few days later it would come out that they weren't patient because He wasn't what they thought He was. He wasn't going to usher in the Kingdom with a sword. Although I guess you could say, that Scripture is a sword, but it's a different kind of sword. It's the kind of sword that we use on ourselves. It's the kind of sword that cuts down to the joints and marrow and teaches us who we are and what is wrong with us and what we need to change and how to change. This was not the sword they were expecting. They didn't expect a sword of humility, of compassion for others. They wanted to squash Rome. And when it became evident that He wasn't going to do that, then it was very easy to rile up the people so that they would later on say, "Crucify Him, His Blood be on us and our children."

So this reading from the Philippians, in contrast to what the people were doing, is how we should interpret the reading. At first, everything is great, the Lord is God, Hosanna in the highest, blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. And then later on, people would lose heart. This is in microcosm to the spiritual life because it's a long, difficult road. Most people don't want that whole road. They want *part* of it.

You know the parable about the seed, right? Some gets on the hard ground and never grows at all. Let's say that doesn't apply to us since we say we believe. The people that are the hard ground never believe. But then there's some on the rocky ground, right? And the ground with weeds and it doesn't produce, not very well at all. The rocky ground withers away. And the weeds that don't produce well at all. And only on the good ground does it produce.

The good ground is what the apostle is telling us about here. Don't be anxious about anything. But with prayer and thanksgiving and supplication make your requests known to God.

Now, notice that he doesn't say when these requests and supplications will be fulfilled. This is where patience comes in. *There's really no replacement for patience.* It would be nice if there were. There isn't. There is no formula. We must wait. We must struggle, and things get easier. As you conquer your passions, things get easier. Of course, there are new struggles ahead of you, but things do get easier. This is the way of life: The struggle, and God will help us.

Now, most of the world doesn't like this way, so you've got a lot of counterfeit Christianities that will give you a portion of the story, basically, the "Hosanna-in-the-highest" part of the story but not the part about being patient and the part about morality. But that's the most important part because everybody can be happy and say "Hosanna", but very few of us, because the road is narrow, are going to walk this road our whole life and struggle and inherit the Kingdom.

Really, *all of our problems are because of our bad ideas, our sins, bad priorities and the fact that we are not patient.*

I have been musing about this lately because we're building a temple. We are very close to being done. We have had a lot of setbacks, and we have had a lot of expenses that we didn't expect. And to be honest, I really have no idea how we are going to pay our expenses right now, don't have any idea, except I believe that it's

going to happen. Now, there are moments when I don't. There are moments when I'm quite anxious about it. It's not because we're short of money that I'm anxious, no, that's not the reason. The reason is because I am the problem. I am anxious because I'm not holy enough. I'm anxious because I don't think about God enough. Instead of praying, I'm anxious. So really, the problem isn't money; the problem isn't building permits or the City of McKinney or anything else. The problem is me. And it applies to everything else in your life.

This story of Palm Sunday must be understood in the context of all be of Holy Week. The Gospel tells us basically what happened that day, and the epistle today is telling us how we must apply what happened that day. We must be patient. We must be careful about following the Gospel. We must be careful about following the Commandments. We must endure. He who endures to the end will be saved. If you don't, then eventually you will fall away. And it happens to most people. Really, it does. The majority of people that call themselves Christians will not be saved because the way to life is narrow. The way to perdition is broad. More people fit on a broad road.

So really, nothing inoculates you so that you will be saved. Being Orthodox doesn't make you saved. Knowing the Scriptures or the Bible doesn't make you saved. Doing what Saint Paul says will make you saved. Struggle to be careful about nothing, to be anxious about nothing.

It's a process. It doesn't happen all at once. One moment you're great, and the next moment you're anxious about the bills or about this or about someone you care about or whatever. And another time you are focused on God, and then a moment later you're doing something stupid and sinful and destructive to yourself. It's a process. But it must be continued.

So this is why the epistle today is here. Because Christianity is not all about waving palms. Christianity is about becoming perfected. And that is a difficult process. Because there are things in us that don't want to be perfected. There is a lot of junk and garbage in us that wants to hold onto the world. Let's be honest about it. And it keeps us back. And if we allow it to keep us back enough, we lose our way and we don't go back.

So the formula is this: Struggle to follow the Commandments. "If there is anything just, anything pure, anything lovely, whatever is of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things." The more you do it, the more peace you will have.

So if you want to put it mathematically: *Belief plus morality equals peace*. But it's not a formula. It's a way of life.

The people of Israel, some of them, didn't know that formula. And so although they proclaimed Him to be King, later on they turned on Him. So let's not proclaim God to be King and later turn on Him. Oh, this will not be by saying He would be crucified. We wouldn't do such a thing, would we? Well, actually, we would when we don't love His brethren; it's like crucifying Him afresh, when we don't do what He commands us, when we don't struggle to become good.

So let's be in it for the long haul. Let's not just say, "Hosanna in the highest." Let's have God live within our lives by being careful about nothing; and if there is anything good, by doing it. Amen.

This homily is at: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-06_2010-03-28+palm-sunday.html

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Palm Sunday: The Lord is at Hand. 2114

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Gospel today, mentions Lazarus who had been dead and that there was a dinner given for the one who had been raised from the dead. So the Entrance of Jerusalem and the Raising of Lazarus are very much connected. In fact, the troparion is the same for both Feasts.

It was yesterday that we celebrated Lazarus, and to be honest with you, I think the raising of Lazarus is the more important Feast. Of course, this is considered a Great Feast of the Lord, and on this day you have fish, and on Lazarus Saturday you can only have caviar. So by that token, perhaps you might think that the Entry of Jerusalem is more important.

But the Raising of Lazarus is about our resurrection. The Entry to Jerusalem is about the King coming to His people, riding on the colt, and terrible things would happen in the ensuing week. But the resurrection of Lazarus, that is wholly about our resurrection.

And you might not know this: to the Jews, four days in the grave, was the point of no return. Perhaps at three days a person could still be raised. But after four days it was considered to be completely hopeless. Lazarus was four days dead, and yet the Lord raised him.

And to be honest with you, as your pastor I say this in a fatherly way: Most of you don't hear the story of the resurrection of Lazarus during the Church year. You come for Palm Sunday, but you don't come for Lazarus. You did not come yesterday for the Liturgy when we read the entire chapter 11 of John. And that's the more important one, because that truly makes application to you.

Now, I'm sorry if this is going to be a little incoherent because, to be honest with you, I'm really tired, and it's just hard to get everything done, so I haven't really thought on the sermon that I would give very much at all today because there were so many other things that came up last night and this morning. So I'll just tell you what's on my heart.

What's on my heart is that we have lots of palms and lots of pussy willows, branches, that we're holding up. So we're emulating the children of Israel. But most of those children of Israel rejected the Messiah. And perhaps most, and certainly a great percentage of people who are Orthodox will not find the Kingdom because they are not striving for the Kingdom. They go to church occasionally, but they are not striving for the Kingdom.

So when I see all these branches, and when I hold the branches, I think: Am I going to be the one who denies God, or am I going to affirm Him by how I live my life?

So when you hold these branches, I hope that that thought comes to you too and you rebuke yourself for the ways in which you do not live like a Christian and that you make up your mind that I will try harder, I will try to do better.

Now, most people, when they think about trying harder in the Orthodox context, say "I'll fast from now on". Or "I'll go to church more." We measure ourselves by these sorts of things. I think you should try harder by trying to love God with all of your heart, to love your neighbor, to read the Scriptures with attention, to pray with attention and not just to occasionally come to church and live your life. That's how I think you should try harder.

Now, all the other things come up with it, fasting is going to help you there, coming to church is going to help you there, but the most important thing is that as you're holding these branches, that you have in your heart that you want to be closer to God.

Now, the Epistle I told you this was going to be incoherent. I was about to talk about Lazarus. Now I'm going to talk about the Epistle. Normally I'm not like this. But I'm sort of shaken up like in a paint mixer today.

The Epistle says, "Rejoice in the Lord alway, again I say rejoice". He goes on to say, "The Lord is at hand". I think that's why this Epistle is selected, because the Lord was coming into Jerusalem, not as an earthly King really; he was coming in meek, on a colt, the foal of an ass.

A King would come in on a great charger with all of his soldiers in front of him and beside him and in back of him and with great shouts and cries about how great he was. There were the shouts and cries. They cried Hosanna, which means God saves.

So the Lord is at hand. So right now we are, in our mind's eye, we are just before the Passion of our Lord. Of course, in a week, if you count exactly a week we won't even be in church at this moment in time. We will be getting ready, hopefully getting up and getting ready to come to the Agape Vespers because we will have already celebrated the Resurrection. So it's only a week's time now.

And the Lord came into Jerusalem with great fanfare. People cried out: "God saves". They put their garments down. They put the branches of trees and palms down as accepting Him as their King and as victorious. But He didn't stay in Jerusalem that night. Saint John says, He went back and He lodged near there, in Bethany. And the reason why was because in Jerusalem after all that, He wasn't accepted by the people. The ruling class hated Him and wanted Him killed. So He would go in and out of Jerusalem during that period of time before His Passion, Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and He was arrested Thursday.

The Lord is at hand. What does that mean for you and me? In history, when the Lord went into Jerusalem with all this fanfare there was great evil that occurred in the coming days. People plotting to have Him killed. Judas covenanting for thirty pieces of silver to give Him up. Lies being told and palms being greased and bribes being done. And evil friendships being made, between Herod and Caiaphas.

The Lord is at hand. It says, Rejoice. So what does it mean for us? If we were those people, would we rejoice, would we cleave to the Lord? You're holding branches in your hands. May God help you to truly cleave to God, to struggle to follow the Commandments, not just to follow the formal things of our faith.

(Here's more incoherence.) When I was a child, I was raised Roman Catholic, and really it was just about being a good Catholic, which means that you go to church on Sunday. There wasn't really much beside that. My father was not a believer. He said he believed in the "Man upstairs". And so there was not really much application of religion to our household, but certainly there were some external things, you had Palm Sunday and Ash Wednesday and you had these kinds of things. And to me, all that didn't make much sense because it didn't seem like there was any heart in it.

And when I was becoming Orthodox, one of the hardest things for me was seeing all of these things that we do as Orthodox Christians and looking at them and saying, "those are empty rituals". Because that's the way that people outside of the Church think of the things that we do. They think of being anointed with oil as an empty ritual, of getting the blessing of a priest as an empty ritual, holding palms in our hands, etc are just empty rituals and traditions of men.

When I became Orthodox I saw the great and deep meaning of these things. As you're holding these branches in your hand, you should be thinking: Which child of Israel am I going to be? Am I going to be the one who says, Crucify Him? Or am I going to be the one that loves Him and follows Him in His way of the Cross? That's very important. There's nothing empty at all about holding these. The angels see you holding these things up. God sees you holding these things up. So what are you saying? Are you saying that you are going to follow Him? Or are you saying that you're just coming because it's a big church holiday?

It's very important to have heart in what you do. And that's why the Epistle of the Philippians is here. "Rejoice in the Lord. Again, I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at

hand. "

Of course, the Lord is always at hand. He doesn't have to go through Jerusalem for us to have Him be at hand. He's always with us. He sees all. He understands all. He helps with all.

And why should we rejoice in the Lord? Well, Saint Paul goes on to say, Be careful about nothing. That's kind of archaic. It means basically: Don't care about anything that's unimportant. Let your request be known to God, and the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ. So this is the point of our life: To have the peace of God in our hearts.

So you're holding up branches. Are you a peaceful person? Are you trying to be a peaceful person? This is important. You're making a statement right now. So you have to follow through on your statement. You have to struggle to only know God. That's all that matters. Everything else is going away. And to have the peace of God which passeth all understanding in our hearts. By definition we can't even understand what that is like because it passes all understanding. But it's a whole lot better than the peace we have now. It's a whole lot better than the world we have now. This world is full of sorrow. Even if you have joy in the world, there's still so much sorrow. If not directly in your personal life, in those you love or in those you know or even in those you don't know, finding about all those terrible things being done in the world. There's not much peace in the world.

But we're holding up branches, and only a few days later the Lord is going to be arrested. He's going to be scourged. He's going to be spat upon. He's going to be blasphemed. He's going to be made to carry His Cross. He's going to be crucified naked on the Cross, and people are going to throw things at Him, and they're going to try to make Him drink vinegar. And they're going to gamble for His clothing as He's dying. Only in a few days.

And we're holding up the branches and the Apostle is saying, The peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds. So how does it happen? That's a mystery to me. I only know that God helps us to attain peace, but we have to struggle for it.

So as I see all these branches held up, my pastoral prayer for you is that you would struggle to know God in everything and that you would struggle to be a peaceful person and to have the peace of God be within you. It can happen.

Now, let's come back a little bit to the Gospel about Lazarus. As Michael Daum tells me, I go down rabbit trails sometimes. Well, there's a lot of rabbit trails in this little talk, because, as I said, it's a little incoherent.

When Jesus came to Bethany, Lazarus had already been four days dead. Mary and Martha loved their brother dearly, and they loved the Lord; they knew Him well, they knew that He could heal Lazarus. They knew that he could raise Lazarus from the dead, but he'd crossed that demarcation point. He had gone beyond three days. He was four days dead.

So Martha comes to Jesus and says, "Lord, if You were here, my brother would not have died". And He tells her that he will be raised up. And Martha says, I know he will be raised up on the last day. And then Jesus says: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life; do you believe this?' She says, Yes. But she didn't quite believe. She almost believed.

Isn't that like how it is in your life? Don't you almost believe? Don't you 99 percent believe, but there is a part of you that doesn't believe maybe? A part of you that thinks, I'm that guy that good thing is not going to happen to?

So after she calls Mary and then they go to the tomb, the Lord says, Open the tomb, and Martha who had just had the conversation with the Lord, says, Lord, it's been four days, he stinks. And Jesus says, Didn't I tell you to believe? They open the door, and of course Lazarus comes out bound in the grave clothes. And they take off the grave clothes, and there's living, breathing Lazarus. Raised after four days dead.

I think that this long account that John gives about the raising of Lazarus is because we have trouble believing good things will really happen to us. We have trouble believing we will ever, ever stop being angry at stuff, stop being irritable with our loved ones. Well, start praying more. We think the things in our lives are kind of there to stay; they're there for days, they have been there so long; they're four days dead; they're not going to get better. But they will get better. The peace of God which passeth all understanding can be in your heart. All you need do is just pray, struggle, fast, be a Christian, put away the things that are not Christian. Change your priorities. It's a difficult thing.

We just had a baptism today. It's only the beginning for this young man. It's a happy occasion, but in essence, you could say this is like Michael holding up palms and saying Hosanna. Okay, now, after the baptism he's going to prove whether or not he loves God by how he lives. All the possibilities are there. All the capability is there; it's up to him now. Is he going to live as a Christian or not?

May God help us to make good on our promise as we wave our palms and our pussy willows. It's a beautiful sight to see. But let it be our statement, that we want the peace which passeth all understanding in our hearts. And then God will help us. May God help you in all things. Amen.

This homily is at: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-06_2014-04-13+the-lord-is-at-hand_philippians4-4-9.doc

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¹ See Luke 7:11-15 (the raising of the son of the widow of Nain), and the raising of the daughter of the ruler of the Synagogue, Jairus (Mark 5:22-43 and Luke 8:41-56)

² Elias raised the son of the widow of Sarepta, (3 Kings 17:17-24 Septuagint., 1 Kings 17:17-24 Hebrew version)

³ Elisha raised the son of the Shunammite woman (who he had prophesied the barren woman would bear, and who is held to be Jonah the prophet) (4 Kings 4:17-37 Sept, AKA 2 Kings 4:18-37 Heb.)

⁴ Luke 17:21

⁵ A sermon is often given before the tomb after the Lamentations of Good Friday. It is our custom to speak extemporaneously, and then for a smaller group to gather before the tomb to hear the half hour sermon of St Epiphanius read.