

Death over Death:

The Mystery of True Resurrection

(From notes on the life of repentance)

THE IMAGE OF CHRIST carrying His cross, leaving Jerusalem for the place of crucifixion, escorted by some of his disciples and relatives, is one of total shame and disgrace. But Christ endured it for the sake of the joy that lay before Him (Heb 12:2). This was the most climactic hour of Christ's life, the hour of His departure with no return. This hour had been known in advance in all of heaven and had been spoken of by the spirits of the Old Testament saints, awaiting the world's redemption: "And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk 9:30, 31).

His exit from Jerusalem corresponded to His departure from the present world. The cross was the instrument of crossing over from this world to the eternal world. Departing from this world is not fulfilled in a natural way by those who have hated the world and denied it, because the world inevitably takes revenge against those who have scorned it and shamed it: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15:18-20).

Jesus said these words before he went to the cross, before the judgment, before the revealing of the plan to arrest Him and fabricate accusations against Him, before calling in false witnesses, before the desertion of His disciple (which illustrates how the world uses those who are closest to torture saints' souls). Christ knew well what the hatred and envy of this world had prepared for him; the plan to torture him and then get rid of Him: "And taking the twelve, he said to them, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; they will

scourge him and kill him ..." (Lk 18:31-33); "Then Jesus knowing all that was to befall him, came forward" (John 18:4).

It is important for us to know that Christ was not surprised by the world's behavior towards Him. He Himself taught His disciples that the world will conflict with everything that does not belong to it. The world inevitably disdains those who disdain it and mocks everyone who mocks it. This is the inevitable consequence of departure from the world.

Christ bore this shame with total acquiescence because from the beginning He had accepted His role to stand against the world and hate its evil deeds, knowing that He would have to pay the price for this!

The shame that the cross symbolized, and which Christ bore as he departed the world, was the inevitable cost of the stand he had made. As a consequence the shame of crucifixion, to die in public, stripped of every dignity, with the addition of mockery and revenge through scourgings, beatings and being spat on, has become the symbol of the treatment that can be expected by anyone who has denied the world and sought only faithfulness to Christ.

Christ made this a general rule to be the primary consideration of anyone who intends leaving the world and follow Him: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27). "Follow me" (Mk 10:21). "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mk 8:34) "And he said to all, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'" (Lk 9:23).

It is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote: "Therefore let us go forth to him outside... and bear the abuse he endured" (Heb 13:13). Christ's shame was the supreme example of scorn and humiliation. Each person will have his own particular cross. This means that every person will have his own shame that the world will fashion for him out of the very type of humiliation he hates the most.

Those who desire to follow the Lord do not shirk their cross but increase it and embellish it with other kinds of deprivations, mortifications of the flesh and with fasting, which submits the ego: "I afflicted myself with fasting" (Ps 35:13). We know from the Apostle's words, from the lives of the saints, and from experience that inasmuch as a man experiences humiliation and dies both unintentionally and intentionally together, he will experience eternal life deep within him and live it day by day.

I will follow You O Lord, just show me where You are going.

“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?’ ” (John 14:5)

Thomas did not know that he was called to the cross and to death. He thought that he was invited directly into the Kingdom by following the Messiah. But the truth that Thomas should have known and that everyone who follows Christ must accept is that the cross comes first then the Kingdom. First comes voluntary death with Christ, then life with Him.

“And he said to all, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me’ ” (Lk 9:23).

No-one is pressed to follow Christ by force and neither is the Kingdom gained through a soft and luxurious life, neither does it come by merely praying and participating in the rituals of worship; it requires self denial. This means we must separate our souls from all the roots of outward show and vain glory, depriving ourselves of the pleasures that make us cling to the world, to flesh and blood and to earthly dust.

When we do this it is part of the inner death, that is the intentional death, which is followed by the unintentional. After that a man is free to carry his cross daily, to bear the insults of the world around him, the injustices of his environment, the insolence of evil men, the betrayal of relatives, friends and disciples, painful diseases and diminishing faculties. It is through all these tribulations that the devil tries to master him and, at his weakest point, hopefully cast him into doubt and denial of the faith. All of these constitute the outer death, which is the unintentional death.

Without the inner or intentional death, i.e. the denial of one’s self, it is impossible for man to have the strength to carry his cross daily and follow the Lord. It will be impossible for him to bear the outer or unintentional death. The Lord therefore wisely gave us the commandment to deny ourselves before bearing the cross.

For man to follow the Lord he has to first pursue the intentional death, the denial of self, so that he may be able to carry the cross that is given him.

Inner death is hard, harder than outer death. Self-denial, renouncing and putting to death the sinful nature, is more difficult than bearing the humiliations, injustices and tribulations of outer death. He who is able to deny and renounce his self is able to bear the worst humiliations and even be joyful in them. The one who loves his life and pampers it might be able to bear a humiliation once or twice, but he could never bear it daily!

It is easy for the one who succeeds in embracing inner death to carry his cross every day, no matter how heavy it is. He follows the Lord not to judgment but to Golgotha and then to the Kingdom and will be where Christ is. To practice the inner death of self is in truth to practice the life of a dead man!

It is required of us that we be dead regarding ourselves and other people and be alive to Christ, and this should affect every thought, every action and everything else in life: “that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15).

Practicing the outer death that is unintentional comes as we focus on and find the reality of the inner death. Have we actually died to ourselves, our bodies and the world? If the unintentional death conforms to the intentional death, then that is the greatest proof to man that he lives with Christ!

How great is our need to accept unintentional death? It is the very essence of the Christian life. It is the resurrection: “Follow Me”.

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus ... who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (inner death) ... he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (accepting the final outer death)” (Phil 2:5-8).

(1971)

St Athanasius the Great

**Because the Word became flesh, the death,
the resurrection and exaltation, must be ascribed to Him**

He is said to be exalted from the lower parts of the earth, because death is ascribed even to Him. Both events are reckoned His, since it was His Body , and none other's, that was exalted from the dead and taken up into heaven. And again, the Body being His, and the Word not being external to it, it is natural that when the Body was exalted, He, as man, should, because of the body, be spoken of as exalted.

If then He did not become man, let this not be said of Him: but if the Word became flesh, of necessity the resurrection and exaltation, as in the case of a man, must be ascribed to Him, that the death which is ascribed to Him may be a redemption of the sin of men and an abolition of death, and that the resurrection and exaltation may for His sake remain secure for us.

Discourse 1 Against the Arians, 45.

The Monastery of St Macarius

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