



Of old the tree in the garden stripped us naked, and by its taste did the enemy bring in death. Now the tree of the Cross, which for all mankind is bearing the garment of life, was planted upon the earth, and therefore is all the world filled with every joy. As we see it revered today, let us, O peoples, cry aloud together unto God in faith: Full of glory is Your house, O Lord. (Kathisma III. For the Cross)

Beloved Parishioners and Friends,

Today, Sunday, March 22nd, we stand at the mid-point of our Lenten journey. Very few of us, if any, have ever experienced what we are now going through in the face of this dreadful pandemic. Never before in the fifty years of my priesthood have I had to celebrate liturgical services in an empty church. Not even in the worse persecutions against the church, when Christians were driven into the depths of the catacombs, were they compelled to suspend worship. Yet, here we are, wondering what Holy Week and Pascha will be like this year, given the latest predictions that all measures against large gatherings will remain in place until the end of April, or beyond. Thousands of people reduced to following services on line; others unable because they lack the technology; while others, indifferent to God and religion, occupying themselves in various activities. Undoubtedly, the most disgraceful scene coming from the beaches of Florida, where thousands of college students are “celebrating” winter break, totally indifferent to the threat of the virus, unconcerned that they themselves could be infected and, thus, infect others. What an indictment on the spiritual and moral vacuity of the generation that is to follow; self-absorbed and completely indifferent to the suffering and welfare of their fellow human beings.

I must confess that I am troubled to the depths of my being by all this, knowing that I, like any other person, could be infected and die. I’m not afraid of death. Longevity, as Dr. King said in his last sermon in his Atlanta church, has its place. But what is more important than that, is living a life that manifests my faith in Christ, which ought to be a life of repentance and service to others. As we stare this deadly virus in the face, we might ask ourselves, why, and why now? Perhaps Solzhenitsyn is right, it is because we have forgotten God: “More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: **Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.**

Since then I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our Revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by

that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: **Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.**" ("Men Have Forgotten God" – The Templeton Address).

I leave it to you, my readers, to contemplate what this means for us and our times, "we have forgotten God." It is no surprise to me that this deadly virus originated in China, a country steadfastly committed to communism and atheism; whose people are allowed to consume even the most noxious victuals (they would do well to consider why God took the time to warn the Israelites about such things). No, it is not a pointless challenge. All I ask is that we, who are free to do so, consider the spiritual and moral conditions in our society and world today: needless wars; the decline in civility; the promotion of sexual immorality; the marketing of abortion as an inalienable "right"; the ruinous assault on the institution of marriage (one man-one woman) and, the ghastly attempt to redefine the meaning of gender (as assigned by God and nature). Indifference to the word of God and immorality have their price, and it is not inexpensive.

We are all praying for those suffering from the virus. We pray for all the first responders, police and firefighters, getting them to hospitals. We pray for the well-being of the doctors and nurses attending them. We pray for our civil authorities, charged with directing us on how we should protect ourselves. And, we pray for all those in laboratories world-side struggling to find a cure.

I believe that our Lord, ever merciful, hears our prayers. I fervently believe that His holy Mother, the Theotokos, and all the saints are interceding for us. Now, let us remember, not just in this time of crisis, but every day of our life, to hear the Word as He speaks to us on this Sunday of the Veneration of His holy Cross,

"When He had called the people to *Himself*, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35).

Lord, may the light of Your holy Gospel illumine our hearts and minds, and may we have the courage to take up Your cross, and, following You to the grave and beyond, rejoice in Your glorious Resurrection!

With love in Christ our Lord,
Fr. George A. Alexson