

Christ is our Friend – Palm Sunday
Fr. Hector Firoglanis – Sunday, April 12, 2020

Holy Week reveals, more than anything else, the perfect love of God for humanity.

In the Greek language, there are several words which translate into love – all of them expressing a unique quality of God’s perfect love for us.

- **Agape Love** – The unconditional love of God expressed most perfectly by His sacrifice on the Cross.
- **Storgi Love** – The parental and nurturing love of God who cares for all his children.
- **Eros Love** – The passionate and mad love of God which pursues us at every moment of our lives.
- **Filia Love** – The friendship love of God – the Philanthropos – which I want to focus on in today’s sermon to encourage us during this pandemic and to help draw us more intimately into the Passion and Sufferings of Christ during Holy Week.

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It is appropriate to speak about the Filial love of Christ on this day, as yesterday, on the Saturday of Lazarus, our Lord learned of the death of His friend Lazarus, and wept. In addition to the Disciples, there were people whom Jesus cared for deeply, who were his friends – among them were Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha.

But not everybody, as we know, was a friend of the Lord. Soon after the raising of Lazarus, the enemies of Jesus began in earnest to plot his death. Let us pay close attention to the scripture readings and hymns of Holy Week, which reveal how the passions of jealousy, ego, avarice, and insecurity brought about the brutal torture and death of our loving God.

The theme of watchfulness prevails during the Bridegroom services, the first of which will be prayed this evening at 7:00, and I pray that we will always be watchful of our own souls, taking great care to not allow these evil passions to take hold of our own hearts.

In addition to the evil plots of the enemies of Jesus, we see the fickle nature of the crowds and so-called friends of Jesus. On Palm Sunday, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a

donkey, they are cry out, "**Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!**" Five days later, however, the same crowd cries out, "**Crucify Him. Crucify Him**" (Luke 23:21). With friends like these, who needs enemies?

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Good friends stick with each other through thick and thin. But we don't reciprocate the goodness of Christ, as is poetically expressed in the Holy Friday hymn when Christ speaks thus to His people:

MY PEOPLE, WHAT HAVE I DONE TO YOU,
OR HOW HAVE I OFFENDED YOU?
TO YOUR BLIND, I GAVE SIGHT, YOUR LEPERS I CLEANSED,
THE PARALYTIC I RAISED FROM HIS BED.
MY PEOPLE, WHAT HAVE I DONE TO YOU,
AND HOW HAVE YOU REPAID ME?
INSTEAD OF MANNA, GALL; INSTEAD OF WATER, VINEGAR;
INSTEAD OF LOVING ME, YOU NAIL ME TO THE CROSS.

(Antiphon 12, Tone 8)

Would we have treated Christ differently if we lived on this earth during His passion?
How would we describe our relationship and friendship with Christ today?

Is our friendship with Christ growing stronger or colder during this pandemic? During this time when we cannot come to Church to pray, to receive the Sacraments, and to be encouraged by one another?

It's hard. This is a big trial we are going through. But we know that good friendships are tested through the fire of life's trials. St. Paisios says *we cannot arrive at the spiritual spring without first going through the spiritual winter, when the spiritual parasites of our soul are killed off.*

Indeed, as we look around us, the birds are chirping, the grass is growing again, and the trees are blooming all around us, but we are still going through our spiritual winter.

We are being tested spiritually this Lent as we never have been before, and our biggest test awaits us this week.

This year you won't have the opportunity to bow down and kiss the decorated icon of the "Nymphios," the Bridegroom at tonight's service.

This year, you won't be able to be anointed with the Holy Unction on Wednesday evening.

This year, you won't be able to prostrate yourselves before the "Stavromeno," the Crucified Christ, on Holy Thursday evening and tenderly kiss His holy feet in the silence of the Church.

This year, we won't be able to sing the "Encomia," the Lamentations together on Friday evening and process with the kouvouklion and Epitafio around the church.

This year, we won't be able to share the Paschal light with each other, beholding the glow of Christ's Resurrection overcoming the darkness of the church as we share the Light from one person to another.

This year, we won't be all together to sing with all of our hearts the "Christ is Risen" in the Church, uniting ourselves with our Resurrected Lord through the Holy Eucharist. .

It will be a different Holy Week this year, and I won't pretend that everything will be just as good as always. It won't, because this is not the way Holy Week and Pascha was meant to be experienced and celebrated. But I pray this year's Holy Week instills within each of us a renewed gratitude, love, and desire for us to be together again, to fast together, to worship together, and to celebrate together with greater yearning.

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This week we will be reminded once again of the deep love Christ has for us and the true friendship he desires from each of us.

On Holy Thursday (service of Holy Wednesday evening) He humbles Himself to wash the feet of His Disciples.

After the washing of the feet and the Mystical Supper, which we celebrate Thursday morning with the Divine Liturgy, Jesus says to His Disciples: "***You are my friends...***" (John 15:14).

"You are My friends," the Lord says to us. When St. Porhpyrios expounds on these incredible words that God desires to be our friends, he writes: "***Υμείς φίλοι μου έστε... βρέ!***" "***You are my friends, Vre!***"

The Elder adds the “vre” to emphasize, **“You are my friends, man”**... get it through your head, I desire to be your friend! This is real!

With Christ, His Word is Truth, and He shows what a true friend does by sacrificing Himself on the Cross, backing up His own words: **“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends”** (John 15:13).

And again after His Resurrection, He reassures us that His divine friendship is not temporal but eternal. His final words before His Ascension are: **“I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen”** (Matthew 28:20).

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During these difficult times, how can we begin to reciprocate and make ourselves worthy of our Lord’s friendship?

First, the obvious thing to do is to pray at home, build up your house church as we’ve spoken about, and follow the services on the Live-Stream together with your family and making it a time of prayer and connecting with Christ and His Church. Will it be the same? Of course not. But it’s the best we have at this time.

We have put Holy Week resources on the parish website under the “Resource” tab to help us and our children connect more deeply with the services this week. I’ll also be sending out a parish email this afternoon with other day-to-day resources to carry out with your family.

Secondly, let us continue to turn to the Saints – the most loyal and best friends of Christ – for their prayers, protection, and healing during this Coronavirus Pandemic.

I’m sure many of you have noticed that our beloved little Greece has been gaining a lot of positive attention in the media for its superb handling of the Coronavirus outbreak. Greece’s quick and decisive response to the outbreak has contributed to a record-setting flattening of the curve, especially when compared to its European neighbors.

Spain and Italy are experiencing over 300 deaths from Covid-19 per million people in their countries, while France is at 168 deaths per million, and the Netherlands at 140. Germany drops down to 28, while little Greece is doing the best at 8 Covid-19 deaths per million.*

The government of Greece is getting most of the credit, and deservedly so for its swift and competent handling of the crisis.

At the same time, I can't help but to think about the role of the faithful people in Greece, who perhaps more than any other country in the world, are calling upon the friends of Christ – the Saints – for help. Just as we are doing here in our church, churches and monasteries all over Greece are offering Paraklesis services and calling upon the help of the Virgin Mary and St. Nikiforos the Leper, for prayers and protection during this time.

Always, and especially during these times of crisis, we must use our heads and our hearts, our logic and our faith – for this synergy of Grace working with our human efforts is what this polarized and broken world needs now more than ever.

Third: To be a friend of Christ, just as Christ is the Philanthropos, the ultimate friend of humanity, we are called to follow his example and become little philanthropists.

St. John Chrysostom speaks of two Liturgies and two tables: The Divine Liturgy with the Table of the Holy Altar (which at this time the faithful cannot attend) and the Second Liturgy with the table of the poor.

St. John Chrysostom goes on to say: **“The rich exist for the sake of the poor; the poor exist for the salvation of the rich.” It is a symbiotic relationship.**

One of our parishioners, Timm Wenger, has a podcast on Ancient Faith Ministries called “The Second Liturgy.” During your down time, I encourage you to look up this podcast and learn about how we can engage more in the Second Liturgy –for it is the poor who suffer the most during Pandemics when the economies of the world begin to shrink.

Let us not forget that both Liturgies serve Christ, for it is our Lord who says, **“That which you have done for the least of my brethren, you have done it for me.”**

I'd like to thank those of you who have stepped up over the last few weeks and have given above and beyond your stewardship pledge to the Church, helping us to respond to the families and individuals in greatest need during this crisis.

A few days ago, I received a message from our friend, Bishop Neofitos of Mt. Kenya, informing me of the Coronavirus crisis in Kenya, where the priests and people of his diocese are in dire need of food, soaps, supplies, and basic necessities for survival.

We are reminded every day, no matter how bad we have it, most of the world is suffering so much more. In fact, although we may get discouraged and experience anxiety about the future, we all have enough food, shelter, and security, and are very, very blessed.

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I'd like to close with the last words of Jesus on the Cross as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark: **“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”**

As we prepare to enter a Holy Week like no other, let us reflect on our own lives and ask: **“My God, My God, why have we forsaken Thee?”**

This year, let us enter into Holy Week, not with disappointment about our circumstances, not with half-heartedness because we can't come to church, and not with anxiety about an uncertain future.

Rather, let us enter Holy Week this year with a repentant and humbled heart, acknowledging that perhaps we have not been a good friend to our Lord.

Jesus says to His Disciples, to us: **“You are my friends, “Vre...” You are my friends if you do whatever I command you”** John 15:14).

Let us hasten therefore to obey the commandments of God.

Let us worship Him at the Altar Table of the First Liturgy.

Let us serve Him at the table of the poor of the Second Liturgy.

Let us not forsake Him anymore.

Let us truly be His friend, and He promises to be with us always, even unto the end of the age. Amen.

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