

April 15, 2007

## St. Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Gospel reading selected by Holy Church for the Agape Vespers of Pascha is arguably the most unique choice in all the annual lectionary. And its uniqueness consists in this irony—it is the only reading in the whole lectionary that ends with an explicit act of unbelief: "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, *I will not believe.*"

These words of the Apostle Thomas were chosen, of course, in order to continue the course of the Paschal accounts of the Lord's post-Resurrection appearances, and more specifically this reading was selected to prepare the Church for the sequence of that disciple's story on the following Sunday, the narrative in which our Lord directly meets the challenge of Thomas: "Reach your finger here, and see My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

As it stands by itself, however, the first half of the Thomas story, which is the Gospel we hear at Vespers on Pascha evening, stands out as both shocking and ironical. One would think that the liturgical tradition of the Church had in mind to embarrass Thomas for a whole week until the final part of the story could be told.

The ironical quality of this truncated Gospel account, moreover, is further enhanced by another, more recent popular custom of the Church. In modern times it has become usual in Orthodox parishes to read that Gospel story in all the languages represented in the particular congregation gathered for Vespers. Thus, according to the background and experience of the parishioners, St. Thomas' words of unbelief are repeated over and over in various languages (once up to as many as 22 in our own parish) on Sunday evening. Tongue after tongue throws down the identical challenge: *I will not believe . . . ou me pistevo . . . cha chreid mi . . . geloof ik het niet.*

An hour or more may be required to go through the different versions of that single Gospel story, each of them ending with yet another repetition of the unbelief of Thomas: *non credam . . . semmikepen el nem hiszem . . . will ich es nicht glauben.*

Through all the nations of the earth, as it were, there resounds Thomas's sustained refrain of unbelief: *je ne le croirai point . . . tror jeg det ikke . . . ne poveryou.* The Turk proclaims his unbelief, as well as the Navajo. The dark jungle dialects of Africa are followed by the classical tones of Mandarin and Arabic. In this refusal of faith the ancient voice of Tibet is joined with the native tongues of the south Pacific: "I will not believe!"

Because it is specifically a Gospel reading, the congregation continues to stand until all the nations state their set purpose of unbelief. The proclamation can become discouraging, as the refusal to believe grows ever more catholic—from Parthians and Medes and Elamites, from the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, from Phrygia and Pontus—all of them proclaiming their resolve not to believe. It is declared by Jew and Gentile alike, foolishness to the one, and to the other a stumbling block.

This diverse but universal resistance to the proclamation of the Gospel stands as the world's first response to the Great Mandate given to the Church at Pascha. On the morning of Holy Saturday, the very day before, the Lord in the prescribed Gospel selection commands us, "Go, and make disciples of all the nations." And at the Divine Liturgy of Pascha itself He tells us, "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The Resurrection of our Lord is both the context and the content of the Great Commission to evangelize all the nations. In the Church's liturgical year, Pascha is the feast of sending out the missionaries.

For this reason, the world's resistance to the Gospel can hardly be faced until we deal with the Church's resistance to the Gospel. Surely this is why the New Testament writers are so explicit when they describe the unwillingness of the Apostles to accept the joyful message proclaimed to them by the Myrrh-Bearing Women on Easter morning (Mark 16:11,13,14; Luke 24:22-24). It is as though the splendor of the apostolic faith had to be preceded by the stupefaction of the apostolic unbelief. This is what renders the story of Thomas so ironical, and the Resurrection so challenging.

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