

5th Sunday after Pentecost: My Desire is that Israel be saved

A sermon by Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
Delivered on July 16, 2006

Romans 10

¹Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. ²For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Christ is among us!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is with sadness this week that reports come to us of even more dramatic violence in the Middle East, in open warfare between the modern nation of Israel and the terrorist organization Hezbollah in Lebanon. Whenever there is open war in the world the hearts of all good men and women suffer, especially for the children who will be injured, whose childhood innocence will end. It is even more troubling when such events take place in or around the Holy Land which in a perfect world would be the seat of everything good and noble. More commentators speak openly of the current conflicts as a World War, and undercurrents of apocalyptic fear can be felt. In the midst of this today the Church presents to us by Providence the readings from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel of St. Matthew. In these blessings and their wisdom may we find some hope and comfort and guidance.

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Christ was asked about the end of the age. We read in Chapter 24 the following:

³Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" ⁴And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. ⁵"For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. ⁶"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. ⁷"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. ⁸"All these are the beginning of sorrows. ⁹"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My

name's sake. ¹⁰“And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. ¹¹“Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. ¹²“**And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.** ¹³“But he who endures to the end shall be saved. ¹⁴“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. [Matthew 24]

In this world we have tribulation, and we can expect to see wars, and hatred, and deceit. God did not make it this way—we did. Is there any hope for us?

Romans chapter 10 opens with St. Paul's personal confession of hope: ¹Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. The Israel of which he was speaking was of course the Israel of his day, being the body of all those who believed in God through Judaism but had not accepted the Messiah, the Christ. But in that they are really emblematic of the whole world. For we all can suffer the basic problem: though we have a “zeal for God,” it is frequently “not according to knowledge.” ³“For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.” This could be described as the problem we see in our lives today. All over the world, strife and conflict increase when the souls of everyday men and women, people like any one of us, seek to do things according to our own will, our own sense of what is right, or right enough for the moment. Then, when the reality of other people with their own sovereign wills comes intruding into our little kingdoms, we get frustrated, upset, antagonistic, impatient, uncharitable, judgmental, etc. When this state of spiritual dis-ease becomes an epidemic, neighboring societies are ready to erupt in open warfare with each other. This is what we see in the Lord's teaching: “because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” But if we seek Christ and His righteousness, we are led to patience, love, compassion and peace, for “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (Romans 10)

The Gospel of Matthew also demonstrates that there is a spiritual dimension to evil in the world. The belief in the existence of the demonic as well as the angelic powers is basic to traditional Christianity and essential to understanding the saving work of Christ. Last week we discussed the issue of being a slave to sin vs. being a slave to righteousness. To be a slave means not only to serve but to belong to another. To be a slave of sin is to be owned by the powers of evil. In today's Gospel, that ownership is very dramatic, a literal possession of two men by demons. That Christ comes to set them free is part of His whole method of operation. They cannot be His if they belong to another. And interestingly, these men are not even of Israel, they are Gergesenes or Gadarenes, Gentiles. Christ comes to rescue all mankind and unite us all within Himself.

The demons are in fact our only true enemies in the world. St. Paul writes in His epistle to the Ephesians: “¹²For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.” Therefore, he advises us: “¹⁰Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” (Ephesians 6). If we want to find peace in this world we must first recognize in our own lives who and what our enemies are, and that there is a spiritual dimension to the conflicts which assail the world. In Christ we can have victory and that victory is accomplished through inner prayer that transforms our character into love, peace, light, and life. Many in the world today believe that peace can be defined as the refusal to deploy one's military under any circumstances. That is a false peace, for the hatred within can still reign. Failure to come to the aid of an ally or to prevent greater evil because it would require the commitment of military power is not an act of peace, but can become itself an act of violence

through acquiescence and acceptance of evil. What really makes peace is the transformation of society and culture one soul at a time. St. Seraphim of Sarov is often quoted as having said, “Acquire the spirit of peace, and a thousand around you will be saved.”

Christians have nothing to fear in this war-torn and cold hearted world. Death cannot hurt them, for they have been given eternal life. Humiliation cannot dissuade them, for they know they are sinners and have no reason for pride. Hatred cannot control them, for Christians are recognized by their love for each other, for their neighbor, and for the stranger. Shall we have fear, and doubt, and anxiety? Or shall we choose the better portion, and sit at the Master’s feet? In conclusion, let us end with St. Paul’s wonderful words of comfort and encouragement:

³⁷Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8] Amen.