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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America: Homily at Great Vespers (Saint Catherine Greek Orthodox Church – Feb. 13, 2021)



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Homily at Great Vespers

Saint Catherine Greek Orthodox Church

Greenwood Village, Colorado

February 13, 2021

Your Eminence Metropolitan Isaiah,

Dear Fathers,

Beloved Sisters and Brothers in the Lord,

I am filled with a special spiritual joy this evening, worshipping with all of you here in this wonderful Church of Saint Catherine. Coming to the Metropolis of Denver is a very happy occasion for me – to be with my beloved venerable brother, Metropolitan Isaiah, the clergy, and to behold the life of our communities here in the West.

Tonight's Vespers Service is a pause in our busy workday lives, to relax into a spiritual frame of mind and reference, and consider the pure beauty and magnificence of our Lord's creation.

Every time I read, or hear, the *Prooimiakon* – our introductory Psalm 103 (LXX) – I experience anew the tender mercies of God's love for us, because He created such a world for us to marvel. The phrases of the *Prooimiakon* never grow old. In this Psalm, we behold the panorama of God's creation in all its majesty and glory.

We proclaim: "***How magnified are Your works, O Lord! In wisdom You have made them all***!"[*] But in this time when the pandemic is yet upon us, we often question this wisdom. There has been so much loss of life and livelihood. And there have been so many difficulties, just to maintain standards of living for families and educational opportunities for our children.

I want us to be honest with ourselves, because this is the only way we can be honest with God. It is very hard to see the purposes or the providence of God in this pandemic, or in any natural disaster. It is one of the great challenges of living as a Christian, to face the suffering of this world, with faith in God, and with compassion for one another.

All the glorious poetry of Sacred Scripture – especially as found in the Psalms – speaks to the splendor and radiance of a world as it is meant to be. But where there is light, even Divine Light in which there is no darkness at all,[†] a shadow can still be cast.

We await the Second Coming of the "Bright Day Star,"[‡] Who will dispel every gloomy obscurity and shadow of death. We acknowledge that we are yet living in an imperfect world, which was created by a perfect God. This contrast is called an antinomy, – *ἀντινομία* in Greek – which challenges our reason, even as we hold on to our faith. For we know, as the Apostle Paul says, that the whole of God's creation:

"… groans with us, sharing the pangs of our new birth. And not only this, but those who possess the first fruits of the Spirit –even we ourselves, we groan deep within as we await our adoption, the redemption of our physical bodies

.[§]

This is the mystery of our Faith. There is a “Now” aspect, that affirms God’s love for us in this present moment. And there is a “Not Yet” aspect, that reminds us we are still on the journey to the promised land. We are waiting for the redemption of our physical bodies in the General Resurrection.

Therefore, my beloved Christians, even in this beautiful cosmos created by our loving Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we await the fullness of salvation, and the end to suffering.

That is why even in this pandemic, we continue to see God’s mercy and faithfulness toward us. Yes, there is suffering, and even death, but they are like the clouds that obscure the sun. The sun is still always there.

The darkness of this present time is not the darkness of a tomb, but the darkness of a womb. Saint Paul reminds us that creation, including us, is in the process of being born. But our new birth does not come without effort, and even pain. What man or woman has been born into this world with ease?

Even our Lord chose to describe His Crucifixion as a woman giving birth:

“***When a woman is in labor, she has pain because her time has come. But when she has brought forth the child, she no longer remembers her distress because of her joy that a human being is born into the world.[**]***

This is truth of our hardships in the world, our suffering in the present age, and even the truth of this pandemic. They are all the birth pangs of our *Ἀναγέννησις* – our Rebirth in Christ. For now, as Saint Paul affirms:

Truly, we have been saved by this hope, but a hope that is visible is no hope at all. Indeed, why would you hope for that which you see? But if we hope for that which we do not see, then we are waiting with patience. [††]

Therefore, beloved brothers and sisters:

Let us hold this Holy Psalm, with which we commenced our prayers and praise this evening, in our hearts and on our lips, with hope for the future. Let us, in the face of suffering of every kind, even as we “walk in the midst of the shadow of death,” [‡‡] let us say with all our souls:

*“**I will sing unto the Lord throughout my life; I will chant to my God for as long as I have my being. May my words be sweet unto Him, and I will rejoice in the Lord. Bless the Lord, O my soul**!*[§§]

Amen.

[*] Psalm 103:26 (LXX).

[†] Cf. I John 1:5

[‡] Revelation 22:16.

[§] Romans 8:22-23.

[**] John 16:22.

[††] Romans 8:24-25.

[‡‡] Psalm 22:4 (LXX).

[§§] Psalm 103:35-37 (LXX).

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